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THROSTLETHWAITE.

BY

SUSAN MORLEY,

AUTHOR OF "AILEEN FERRERS."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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THROSTLETHWAITE.

CHAPTER I.

IT was a fine afternoon towards the end of April—one of those days, so soft and warm and brilliant, that all the experience of past springs scarcely makes it possible to believe that summer has not really begun, and that another day or two will probably bring back piercing east winds, with showers of sleet in the valleys, and white caps on the mountains. A garden-chair, which was in fact an invalid couch on wheels, stood on the sunny terrace in front of the drawing-room windows at

Throstlethwaite. A boy of eighteen was reclining in it.

"How delicious this is, mother!" he said, as he turned towards the lady standing by him. "If this weather would only last, so that I could live out of doors, I should be all right again in no time!"

"The air is very good for you," replied his mother, as she stooped to arrange the cushions which supported him and the plaids which covered him, "but don't be tempted to be imprudent, Frank. Keep out of the wind and in the sun; and don't stay so long as to be tired."

Frank L'Estrange laughed. "You may trust Daniel for that, mother, if you can't trust me! He's grown the stupidest old coddle in existence, and never lets me have my own way one bit. He's mean enough to like making me feel that I'm under his thumb, now!"

The elderly man who stood waiting to draw the chair answered with imperturbable gravity : " Turn about's fair play, Mr. Frank! You've led me a fine dance many a time when you were a little chap ; but now, till you're strong again, you've just got to come home when I fetch you, and that'll be when I think missis wishes !"

Frank laughed again—the joyous laugh which in past days had always been the sweetest music to his mother's ears, but which now gave her a sharp pang of pain.

She was a widow, he was her only child, and every one but himself knew that the days for which she could hope to keep him with her must be few. This apparent rally did not deceive her ; it brought no renewal of hope, but rather a re-awakening of the keen anguish through which she had passed when first she had realized that she must lose him, and which she had forcibly sup-

pressed, lest the perception of it should cloud his remaining months of life.

Now, for a single moment, she turned away, that he might not see her face, but the next restored her self-command.

"That is right, Daniel. Take care of him, and bring him home in good time," she said, with a kindly, grateful smile to the old man.

She knew by instinct that no heart was in such true sympathy with hers as that of old Daniel Fisher. Many friends were kind, were sincerely fond of Frank, and truly sorry for her; but to no one, save to herself and this old man, was the dying boy the one object of exclusive affection, the one absorbing joy, which must be resigned in obedience to a resistless fate.

She valued at its true worth the almost womanly tenderness and tact which enabled her often to trust Frank to Daniel's care

knowing that it would be as minute as her own, and that it was even less likely to be rebelled against, because submission to it was voluntary, and rather an amusement than a duty.

"Now then, Daniel, go ahead!" cried Frank, "or else we shall be expected back before we start!"

Daniel looked at his mistress.

"We are going down to the lake-side, ma'am, for Mr. Frank to see the men doing up the boats. It's nice and sunny down there, and sheltered too by Riddell's Wood, where they're bark-peeling."

Mrs. L'Estrange nodded in approval, and went into the house.

Daniel proceeded to draw Frank's chair towards the lake, which was only a short distance from the terrace. They had not gone far, when a sound of wheels was heard on the drive at the other side of the house.

"It's Joe, sir, going with the dog-cart to the station for Mr. Leonard," said Daniel, looking round.

"He is early," said Frank, taking out his watch. "He'll have a long wait, even if the train is punctual."

"Ay, he will that!" replied Daniel, whose homely speech was always infinitely broader when he was alone with his young master than he allowed it to be when talking to his mistress. "And Joe's not often that keen o' bein' afore his time, neither. But t' inn and t' station's very nigh hand one another, and *that's* what's waked him up!"

"Well, Daniel, Joe isn't the only man I know who likes a crack at the 'Otter!'"

"There's cracks and cracks, Mr. Frank. I thinks nowt on a chap that doesn't like a glass and a bit cheerful company over his pipe of a night. But it's Polly Nixon that Joe's after—silly lad! She's a sort that

wants a deal o' keepin' together, more especial on Saturday afternoons, and waitin' at Otter's Bridge Station for Mr. Leonard comes in handy for seein' what tricks she's up to with all the market folk."

Frank laughed.

"Polly Nixon is very pretty; but if I were Joe, I think I would rather have a sweetheart who didn't want quite such sharp looking after."

"There's more maks o' love than one, Mr. Frank, same as there is o' most things. Some lads likes an upsetten', flighty sort of a lass, that keeps them always in a worry, and hasn't a notion how to behave hersel'; and some likes the quiet, meek sort, that takes every word they say for gospel; and just one here and there has the sense to go after one that's summat like t' makin' of a decent woman!"

Frank could not talk much, but he could

say enough to make Daniel go on, which was what amused him.

“People must choose for themselves, you see, Daniel,” was all he said.

“Choose for theirsels !” growled Daniel. “In course you can’t hinder them ; but they might just as well toss up, for any sense they’ve got to choose ! Folks mostly sorts theirsels crossways. Look at my Joe there. He’s not to say a bad lad, and not so daft as most ; but he’s fairly crazed about yon idle, feckless lass ; while there’s little Dinah Hodgson would be just the very thing for him, and he’ll not hear tell of her !”

“I dare say it will never come to anything with Polly,” suggested Frank, by way of consolation.

“M’appen it mayn’t, sir, but m’appen it may ; and if it does, a nice life she’ll lead him, as I’ve telled him many a time. But says he, only last night, ‘I’d liefer have

Polly, let her plague me ever so, father, than any other lass. It's her or none.' "

" Well, that's true romance, Daniel ! And what did *you* say, then ? "

" Says I, ' Thou'rt a real big fool, Joe ; but thou mun please theesel, and it's thee, not me, as'll have to rue.' "

By this time they had reached the lake, and Daniel drew up the chair into a sunny, sheltered corner, between the boat-house and Riddell's Wood, from which Frank could see all that was going on in both places, besides having a splendid view of lake and mountains ; for Throstlethwaite stood at the foot of Brideswater, one of the least known of the lakes of the North of England.

Stretching down towards the open, level country between the mountain district and the sea, the hills on its shores, especially towards the lower end, were somewhat less bold in outline, as well as less precipitous and

craggy, than many of their more famous rivals ; but this slightly tamer character of its loveliness had one compensating advantage — Brideswater was seldom (almost never) visited by tourists, and the few residents on its banks could enjoy its beauty in undisturbed privacy and quiet.

On the western side, low wooded hills came down close to the shore, leaving space only for a road, and, of late years, for a railroad. The little station of Ottersbridge was at the foot of the lake on this side, and was immediately opposite to Throstlethwaite. On the eastern side of the lake, the mountains, though higher and bolder, gradually receded entirely from it, leaving a wide space of valley. Throstlethwaite was thus almost in the open low country, though commanding a splendid distant view of some of the highest mountains in the dis-

trict, as their crags rose one behind another in picturesque groups beyond the head of the lake.

Frank L'Estrange, boy like, at first derived more conscious pleasure from seeing active work going on than from the beauty of the scenery. He watched with interest the progress of a carpenter and painter who were employed in doing up the boats for the summer. He even gave them some directions, and he was amused by looking at a picturesque group of bark peelers who were at work near the edge of the copse called Riddell's Wood. He knew every man, woman, and child in the village of St. Bride's, which was very near his home; and he was popular among them, as any good-looking, spirited boy with frank, courteous manners and a kindly nature is sure to be, especially when he is the last of an old family, and the heir to a fine property. But after a few friendly

words to one or two of those who were nearest to him he grew tired, and lay back idly in his chair, dreaming pleasant waking dreams of future health and strength (such as had been his until a few months ago) to the accompaniment of the gentle, murmuring splash of the tiny waves of the lake against the wall of the little boathouse cove and pier. He was placed so as to look towards the bridge—known as Otter's Bridge—which crossed the river where it issued from the lake, and he was watching for the first sight of the white column of steam coming round the corner of the hill, which would mark the approach of the train bringing his cousin, Leonard Barrington, to stay over Sunday at Throstlethwaite.

Daniel, who had been standing where he could see right up the lake, now came back to the chair.

“Here's one of the Monksholme boats

•

coming round Ashness Point, Mr. Frank. It'll be Miss Ruth I think."

Frank was roused to instant animation.

"Miss Ruth is it? Oh, I'm so glad! I like to have her when Mr. Leonard's here—they amuse me."

Daniel growled.

"I'd a deal sooner see her keep out of his way. That's another crossways sort of a business to my mind!"

"That? What?" said Frank.

"Well, they've got it all up and down that it's all settled 'twixt her and him; and what good's the likes of him for such as her, I'd like to know."

Frank laughed merrily.

"What preposterous nonsense! I hope they have also arranged 'all up and down' how Mr. Leonard is to contrive to keep a wife."

The boy's utter unconsciousness of what

public gossip *had* arranged in the matter was too much for old Daniel. He felt a mist before his eyes and a choking in his throat, and muttering something, of which Frank only caught "a real bad job any way," he abruptly moved away and went down to the landing-place.

The boat, in which a young lady was rowing herself, was now very near. With a few quick, skilful strokes she guided it unerringly into the little harbour; then, as Daniel took hold of it and steadied it, she sprang lightly out and giving the old man a bright, cordial greeting as she passed, hurried across the grass to Frank's chair.

Ruth Charteris was evidently a frequent and a welcome visitor. Frank seized upon her as he might upon a favourite elder sister.

"How jolly of you to come after all, Ruth. And *what* a day! isn't it?"

"Delicious!" Ruth answered. "I was so glad to see your chair down here."

"I shall be well in no time if this weather lasts," said Frank. "All I want is lots of fresh air. I thought you couldn't come to-day though?"

"Nor could I, but for this sudden burst of summer. I knew that all the available force of our stable would have to go up to Thornbeck to meet the Kennedys, so that I could have no one to ride with me, and I had not thought of its being fine enough for the lake."

"There's the train," cried Frank. "Now, Daniel, we'll start and meet Leonard at the Lodge. Two bits of unexpected luck for me to-day, Ruth, for Leonard did not think he would be able to come any more than you. We only knew this morning."

Daniel's gossip had excited Frank's curiosity, and he looked at Ruth as he spoke;

but as she had stooped to gather some prim-roses, and he could not see her face, he was obliged to content himself with resolving to observe her later, when Leonard also would be there. The next moment they met Mrs. L'Estrange coming to look after Frank. She welcomed Ruth affectionately, and they all walked on together to the Lodge, which they reached at the same time as the dog-cart coming from Otter's Bridge. Leonard Barrington, who was driving, threw the reins to Joe Fisher, and, jumping out, joined the rest of the party. Frank watched him as he spoke first to Mrs. L'Estrange and Ruth, and then to himself, and afterwards walked on with his aunt, leaving Ruth to follow in attendance on the chair. It was all done with a bright, easy grace which was very attractive, and Frank in his own mind decided that the match which Daniel had announced as having been arranged by public

opinion at St. Bride's, was unquestionably a very suitable one. Leonard Barrington was five-and-twenty, well born, good looking, clever, and pleasant; Ruth Charteris was three years younger, and in Frank's opinion (which was very generally shared), was "out and out the prettiest and jolliest girl in the county." Nothing could be more natural than that they should like each other; and (putting aside the fact that there would be hardly anything for them to live upon) Frank concluded that nothing could be more desirable than their marriage. It would be very nice to have Ruth for a cousin, so without further consideration he gave his consent, and was quietly amused by the black looks with which old Daniel, with whom Ruth was a great favourite, and who had never liked Leonard, was evidently considering the same question.

"What's the joke, Frank?" asked Ruth

at last, tired of walking beside him in silence.

"You'll only be savage if I tell you," replied Frank, looking up at her with a mischievous smile and then glancing demurely at Leonard, who was walking in front of them with Mrs. L'Estrange.

"Then don't tell me—I am not curious!" answered Ruth quickly. But though she laughed, she blushed, and Frank, satisfied by her instant consciousness that there was some ground for the report, magnanimously resolved not to tease her, but to amuse himself by discussing the affair afterwards with his mother. Ruth, to avoid all chance of a renewal of such hints, began to talk about some wild ducks' nests which had lately been found in a stream near Monksholme. Daniel, of course, joined in the conversation on such a subject; and as he had various stories to tell of his own experiences in early days,

when his object was first to find such nests, and then to prevent the gamekeepers from sharing his knowledge, Frank was kept well amused until they reached the house. Neither Frank nor Ruth quite believed all the stories which the old coachman had been in the habit of telling them from their babyhood, but they liked nothing better than drawing him out, and both thoroughly appreciated the shrewd sense and dry humour which were his strong characteristics. They loved him for his warm-hearted faithfulness and unswerving integrity, and found unceasing amusement in his obstinate prejudices and his invariable tendency to cry down all young people and every new idea.

When the chair reached the hall door, Leonard came to offer his help to Frank in getting out, and the boy naturally continued to lean upon him as he went into the house. Mrs. L'Estrange followed them. Ruth

Charteris lingered for a moment to say to Daniel, "How much better he seems to-day. So much stronger. After all, perhaps, the summer may cure him in spite of all the doctors say."

"He'll not be here for t' summer to have a chance, Miss Ruth," replied the old man sadly.

"I cannot bear to think it," said Ruth, passionately, with sudden tears in her eyes. "What will his mother do without him? I cannot conceive Throstlethwaite without him—and he is quite different to-day from what he has been for months."

"Ay! but a change so sudden-like isn't to hold by," was Daniel's wiser answer. "He'll not be here long, Miss Ruth, and though t' missis has a brave spirit, it'll just be half hersel' she'll bury when she buries him. Eh! well! We mun just do as we can when he's gone."

Ruth spoke through blinding tears.

"I shall try to hope while I can, Daniel, for her and for us all," she said, as she turned away.

Daniel looked after her.

"*She's* not reckonin' on comin' after him," he muttered. "But why t' Lord should be pleased to tak' him and leave t'other one and give him t' property and yon fine lass for a wife, I'se fairly bet to think. *She's* a sight ower good for him any way; but if he's to be master here, it'll be a good job for them as lives to see it, for her to be missis!"

After which expression of opinion Daniel retired to his own domains.

CHAPTER II.

THE long, low drawing-room at Throstlethwaite looked very bright and comfortable when Ruth entered it that afternoon. It had three windows opening on the terrace, from which a broad grassy glade of the park sloped down to the boathouse, so that the room commanded a beautiful view.

The afternoon sunshine lighted up the old family pictures on the walls ; the old cabinets and china contrasted picturesquely with every modern luxury, in the way of sofas and easy chairs ; a cheerful profusion of books and newspapers covered the tables, and there

were stands of hothouse flowers; a bright wood fire was blazing in the grate, one window was open, and the air was warm and fresh and perfumed.

Frank was established on a couch near the fire, between it and one of the windows; Mrs. L'Estrange was busy making the afternoon tea, and Leonard was waiting to help her with the kettle, which was singing on its stand by the fire. Ruth dropped into a low chair close by Frank's sofa, and his little pet dog instantly jumped into her lap.

"Why didn't you bring Quiz this afternoon?" said Frank, stretching out a hand to pull Tiny's long silky ears.

"Quiz and I had quite a romantic adventure," said Ruth, "but for which we should both have been here more than an hour earlier than I arrived. I set off directly after luncheon, but the little wretch was wilful and disobedient, and while I was getting

the boat ready he *would* go off after rabbits in the wood."

"I know!" said Frank. "He never *can* resist those tempting holes in Hazel Bank!"

"Exactly. Well! when I was ready to start, I called and I whistled—but no Quiz appeared—and when I went back into the wood there was not a trace of him. A gentleman (evidently a stray laker), who had been sketching I think, came up to me and said that he had seen my little dog disappear into one of the holes in the bank. When we went to it we could hear a faint yelping and scuffling underground, and a heap of freshly fallen earth showed what had happened. Quiz had gone in, and the hole had been stopped behind him by a landslip on a small scale. The stranger was very goodnatured and very efficient too. Luckily there were some slates lying not far off, where the men

had been doing something to the mouth of a drain, so we each took one by way of a spade, and worked away vigorously, just as if he had been one of the boys, till we got the hole opened and pulled Quiz out. But in his frantic efforts to help himself out, the little beast had sprained his shoulder and could hardly crawl, so my new friend kindly volunteered to carry him up to the house for me, saying that he was too heavy, and too dirty, with all the damp soil sticking to him, for me to do it myself."

"I should think you almost forgave him for being there at all, in consideration of his usefulness in the emergency?" said Leonard, as he brought her some tea.

Ruth smiled. "Quite! We had worked away together with such good will, that I never thought about his being a stranger, and forgot to resent his intrusion. But when we had made poor little Quiz over to Michael's

care, and there was nothing more to be done, I suddenly remembered how odd it all was, and recovered my manners. The result, however, was only to make *him* turn quite shy, and after having been so very easy and intimate for half an hour, the sudden change was really too absurd! I asked him if he had had any luncheon, but he instantly said that he did not want any, and that he had not a minute to spare, as he must be at Thornbeck in time for the four o'clock train; he had been walking round the lake, and had got into our woods by mistake, hoping to find a shorter path than the high road. It was three then, and quite absurd for him to think of walking five miles in a short hour, —but, though it was all Quiz's fault, it was not so easy to help him. The carriage had started, though mamma was only going to meet the late train, because she had several things to do in the town, and some visits to

pay ; and the luggage cart was gone, too, for no earthly reason but because the men like being in Thornbeck on a Saturday."

"You didn't offer him Zoe!" cried Frank.

Ruth shook her head with a smile.

"No, Frank. My gratitude, though great, was not up to the point of letting an unknown laker mount Zoe. But a brilliant idea occurred to me, and I suggested taking him across the lake at once. I said that I was going on the lake at any rate—it would only take half an hour to go straight across, and then he could easily catch the train at the Carls Gill station. He agreed to this, and we went down to the lake together again."

"The train was so late, that he would have had ample time to walk to Thornbeck," said Leonard, with evident disapprobation.

"But we could not possibly know that," said Ruth. "When we got to the boathouse, and I loosed the chain which I had just

thrown over a post when I went to hunt for Quiz, I saw that he looked about rather puzzled, as if he were waiting for something, so I observed that I didn't think we had much time to spare. Then he said that he was afraid he must have misled me into thinking he could row, as he saw that I had brought no boatman. Of course I told him that didn't matter in the least, but that he had better be quick and get in—and so we set off for Carlsgill landing."

"But, my dear Ruth, was not that rather a strong measure?" said Mrs. L'Estrange.

Ruth coloured, but answered frankly :

"I suppose it was—rather—but you see, till we were fairly off, I never thought of anything but that he had wasted his time and risked losing his train in order to help me, and that it was my business to see that he caught it, after all, if possible."

"Never mind the proprieties, mother," in-

terrupted Frank. "I want to hear the end of the story. It must have been a fine lark for him, sitting there with you rowing for your life to catch his train! I hope he appreciated the situation?"

Ruth laughed merrily.

"My dear Frank, he *hated* it. I could see that it was horrible to him to sit there useless and helpless and let me row him—'the situation,' as you call it, was so intolerable to him, that he could scarcely keep up the conversation politeness demanded,—and it was altogether so ridiculous and uncomfortable, that I was very glad when I had disposed of him at Carlskill, and had the boat to myself, and could laugh at my leisure."

Frank, amused at Leonard's evident annoyance, as he listened to Ruth's account of her somewhat unconventional proceedings, continued to ask questions.

"And what was the hero of the adventure like, Ruth? Of course he will turn up promiscuously on some future occasion, so it is important to know. Was he good-looking? Young, or old? Tall, or short? Dark, or fair? And was he a prince in disguise, do you think, or a humble adventurer born to good luck, and thus thrown in the way of the fairy princess, whose influence will lead him to achieve greatness?"

It was long since Frank had been in such good spirits, or had seemed strong enough to talk so much, and Ruth gladly answered him in the same tone.

"Young—but not too young; a *man*—not a *boy*, Frank! Tall and big, and strong; decidedly good-looking—after rather a plain fashion—neither dark nor fair, but a good respectable sort of brown—and, except that he had a particularly pleasant voice, I think that is about all I can tell you."

"Didn't you find out his name?"

"No. I thought I should like to know—but as he did not ask mine I let it alone."

"How stupid of you! Was he a gentleman?"

"Yes, you inquisitive boy, *quite* — at least——"

"At least——" mimicked Frank. "Well—Ruth?"

Ruth hesitated a little.

"I only meant that though in appearance and voice and manner, and in everything he said and did, or didn't say and do, he was quite like a well bred, well educated man, I don't think he *was* quite like the idle sort of gentlemen we are chiefly accustomed to! As long as there was anything to do, he was all right; but as soon as there was nothing but manner wanted, he did not seem to have it at command! He was not at ease enough to carry off the 'situation' as Edgar or

Oswald would have done, or the Allonbys or Merediths. That was all."

"Couldn't flirt gracefully off-hand, in fact, like Edgar; or better still, if present company were not always excepted, like Leonard there! Well! I hope he will turn up again—don't you, mother?"

Mrs. L'Estrange did not answer, and Ruth turned to her with the frank appeal, "I see you are blaming me, Mrs. L'Estrange. You think I was wrong?"

"Only a little indiscreet, my dear. As it turned out, it all ended well; but was not a tête-à-tête row across the lake with a perfect stranger rather daring?"

"Of course, it would not have done if he had not been—but really if one were always to wait to consider every possible objection, one would never be of any use! If one makes a mistake on the side of rashness there is sure to be time enough to regret it,

but if one is over cautious the chance of helping is lost for good and all !”

Mrs. L'Estrange smiled. “A kind theory, Ruth, at any rate, and I think your instinct is to be trusted to prevent you from ever being really imprudent. Still, dear child, I scarcely fancy your mother would quite approve of this afternoon's proceedings. Such little things give rise to gossip.”

“There were only the fishes to see and report !” replied Ruth. “However, mamma will not like it I know ; and I am sorry to have to tell tales of myself this evening just when the Kennedys have come !”

“Ah ! yes,” said Mrs. L'Estrange. “You expect Agatha and her husband and children this evening. It must seem strange to her coming home for the first time since her marriage six years ago. You will enjoy having them for the summer.”

“I wish we could have had Agatha and

the babies without Colonel Kennedy!" said Ruth. "He is an alarming idea—and we shall not have one of the boys at home to help, for ever so long!"

"You will like him when you know him," said Mrs. L'Estrange. "You were too much of a child when Agatha married to know him at all, but I remember thinking him remarkably pleasant the few times I met him."

"Oh! I daresay we shall do very well in time!" replied Ruth. "But I must confess to having rather a dread of a 'perfect stranger' in the position of a brother, though I didn't mind rowing one across the lake!"

After this, the conversation drifted easily into a discussion of various local topics, during which Frank, who was tired with his previous exertions, was a silent listener, while Leonard, apparently recovering his good humour, joined in it pleasantly enough.

. At length Ruth rose, saying that it was quite time for her to be going home, and she took leave of Mrs. L'Estrange and Frank. That Leonard should walk down to the lake with her was such an obvious act of necessary courtesy, that Mrs. L'Estrange scarcely remarked his doing so, and she was utterly taken by surprise when Frank, raising himself on his couch to watch the two figures crossing the lawn, said with a smile—"Do you think that will really come to anything, mother?"

"My dear boy! what could put such an idea into your head?"

Frank laughed. "Most of my ideas come from Daniel, I think, mother! It had never occurred to me till this afternoon, when he (who by the way disapproves strongly) said that it was 'all up and down' that it was a settled thing. I asked him how people imagined that Leonard could keep a wife,

but he only growled out something about its being 'a real bad job'—and as Ruth arrived at the moment, I had no chance of further information. Seeing them now by the light of Daniel's wisdom, I think there *is* something in it—and it would be a capital thing—if only one could see how it was ever to come off!"

"They are old friends and play-fellows," replied Mrs. L'Estrange, "and the gossip of a country village is easily excited. Of course it would be absurd for Leonard to think of such a thing."

"I suppose so," said Frank. "But if they both wish it, mother, it would be such a charming match! I hope *something* will turn up to make it possible. Don't you?"

"I think that if you mean to be able to enjoy Leonard's company this evening, you must not talk any more now, but be left to rest till dinner-time," said his mother, bend-

ing over him and arranging his pillows. "I am going out for a little while into the garden. Lie down, my darling, and try to sleep."

He was tired enough to obey quietly ; and in another moment she had left the room by the open window, which she closed behind her, and was alone upon the terrace. She felt that she could not have maintained her self-command any longer.

Mrs. L'Estrange had herself been the heiress of Throstlethwaite, and was the last representative of one of the oldest families in the county. The estate was large and unencumbered, but, as much of the land was mountain and wood, the rent roll was comparatively small, and scarcely equal, in these modern days, to maintaining the traditional position of the family. Still, it was a handsome property, and Margaret L'Estrange was a very considerable heiress. At eight

and twenty she married Captain Barrington with her father's full approbation, and the marriage proved a happy one. Old Mr. L'Estrange survived it for three years, long enough to rejoice at the birth of his grandson. After his death, Captain Barrington (who had taken his wife's name) sold out of the army, and the Barrington L'Estranges, as they were then called, lived at Throstlethwaite, generally liked and respected. When Frank, who had remained the only child, was about thirteen, his father died. Not long afterwards, iron was found on an outlying farm belonging to the property, but quite detached from it, and some miles nearer to the sea. The consequent increase of fortune was great, and Mrs. L'Estrange, who was an admirable woman of business, rejoiced over it for Frank's sake. It would give him ample means to take the position in the county which ought to be his, and for

which she had unceasingly laboured to train him. The gradual perception that all her bright hopes must be abandoned, and that her darling was to be taken from her in the fulness of his youth and strength, had been one of the hardest trials that could have been imposed upon her. It had been borne with unflinching and unselfish courage; but of the many dark hours through which she had struggled in lonely misery during the past winter and spring, the present one was perhaps the darkest and the hardest, as it was certainly the most unexpected.

Leonard Barrington was the eldest child of her husband's only brother. This brother had died two years after her own marriage, leaving a widow and several children almost totally unprovided for. Mrs. Charles Barrington came with her children to live at a small cottage in Lingdale, about eight miles from Throstlethwaite; and Leonard, who

was his uncle's godson, had been almost adopted by the L'Estranges. He was educated at their expense, always spent most of his holidays with them, and was quite like a son of the house.

At the time of his uncle's death he was still at Oxford, where he had been sent with the intention of his eventually taking orders, and being provided for by the living of St. Bride's, which was in Mrs. L'Estrange's gift. The next twelve months, however, proved that he had no real inclination to become a clergyman, and was by no means fitted for it, so that the idea was given up.

Leonard was popular, and perhaps deservedly so, for he could make himself very pleasant, but though clever enough, he was idle and fond of amusement, and far from sufficiently impressed with the necessity of hard and steady work if he were to get on in

the world. He tried for one or two appointments under Government, but failed in the preliminary competitive examinations.

Disappointed and rather provoked, Mrs. L'Estrange sent him into a house of business at Hamburg. A school friend of hers had married a rich merchant there, and Leonard was taken into his office.

For two years he remained there obediently, and no complaints of him were made by his employers, but he openly professed to dislike the kind of work, and was not likely to do much good there.

An opening for his return to England had offered itself about nine months before the present time.

Messrs. Nichols and Brandon, the principal bankers in the county town of Edenford, wanted a clerk as foreign correspondent. Leonard was a good linguist, he must have

acquired some knowledge of business, and to oblige Mrs. L'Estrange they agreed to try him.

He was delighted to return to England, and to be again within reach of the amusements and society he liked ; he was always sanguine about work of a new kind, and he eagerly accepted the offered post.

He lived, of course, at Edenford, but was again very often at Throstlethwaite and Monksholme. Frank was fond of him, and so, in spite of all his faults, was Mrs. L'Estrange ; and as Throstlethwaite was a home much more to his taste than Kilhowe, his mother's cottage in Lingdale, he was there as much as possible.

Frank's illness had begun in November, and Mrs. L'Estrange, entirely absorbed in him, and in the conquest of herself for his sake, had never bestowed even a passing thought on the probability of an attachment

between Leonard Barrington and Ruth Charteris.

Now, she suddenly realized it all with sharp and bitter pain—with a momentary fierce rebellion against the fate which was trying her so hardly. Nothing could be more natural than that two young people should fall in love, however wildly imprudent such a proceeding might be ; but in such a case as this, friends would certainly have endeavoured to keep them apart, had not every one of course assumed that Leonard before long would take Frank's place in the world.

The idea of the probable consequences of her boy's death being thus calculated and speculated upon was torture to her. As her eyes followed the boat now pushing out from the Throstlethwaite Cove, she felt something almost like passionate hatred of the two whose happiness was thus to grow out of her

misery. Did the law that one existence must prey upon [another hold good in the moral as well as in the physical world? Why should the joy be taken from her life in order to secure their happiness?

They were young, no doubt, and she was not, but they could not be to each other what Frank was to her, if fate separated them now, it could be but a passing sorrow—life would bring to them other interests, other affections as strong and absorbing, other joys as great, while what could the future hold for her in this world, when she should be childless as well as widowed, except the hope of leaving it?

Leonard was rowing the boat while Ruth steered. He would probably row her up to Monksholme and walk back before dinner. They were happy and joyous in each other's society—heedless of her sorrow—thinking of its cause only as an unexpected turn of

fortune's wheel in their own favour,—and meeting each other more constantly than they could otherwise have done under cover of their visits to the dying boy! As she watched the boat, she seemed to feel each dip of the oars into the water like a blow causing actual physical pain. It all seemed so selfish—so heartless—so brutal!

But with that climax, as the boat passed out of sight round the wooded point of Ashness, there came a sudden revulsion of feeling, and she saw her own injustice.

That public gossip, both high and low, should speculate as to what would follow Frank's death was a matter of course—that Mrs. Charteris should so far take it into consideration as to delay putting a stop to an intimacy which under other circumstances she would have thought it imprudent to allow, was probable enough, and only natural—while Mr. Charteris, after the manner of busy

elderly men, had probably never thought of the matter as one concerning his daughter at all. That Leonard himself should think of it was perhaps pardonable—was certainly probable—for, with all his pleasantness and his many attractive qualities, his aunt knew that his nature was neither high-toned nor unselfish.

But Ruth?—Mrs. L'Estrange recalled her thoughts of Ruth with a keen sense of shame and self-reproach. Ruth Charteris was dearer to her than anything but Frank and the memory of the dead; she had known her from her birth, and had always loved her dearly, and she now sincerely regretted having allowed herself even for a moment to doubt her truth, her affection, or her delicacy of feeling. Ruth might or might not be unconsciously learning to love Leonard, but she was utterly incapable of speculating upon the chances of his succeeding Frank as the

heir of Throstlethwaite, or of having a double motive for the constant visits which were one of the poor boy's greatest pleasures.

Then came the recollection that Leonard was not at all necessarily her heir. She had no relations of her own except very distant cousins on her mother's side, with whom she had little acquaintance, and who had no claim upon the L'Estrange property. After Frank's death it would be completely in her own power, and it was thus not unnatural that it should be assumed that she would make Leonard Barrington her heir; but whether she should do so or not must be a question for future thought.

Was he fitted for such a trust? Was he worthy to marry Ruth Charteris?

For the present, however, all such considerations must be put aside. She could not think dispassionately. While Frank lived all

her strength must be given to her care of him—when he was gone—but that was a thought she could not face at present—and she hastily left the terrace, and turned her steps towards the village, where she had some business.

That half hour's struggle with herself had tried her strength severely, but she felt that rest was impossible, and that only by forcibly turning her thoughts into some other channel could she enable herself to meet Frank and Leonard at dinner with the apparent quiet cheerfulness that was necessary.

CHAPTER III.

RUTH CHARTERIS was the younger of the two daughters of Mr. Charteris of Monksholme, a pretty and pleasant place at the upper end of the lake of Brideswater, and, like Throstlethwaite, on the eastern side.

These were the only houses of any importance on the lake, and they were more than three miles apart by road, though by water the distance was considerably less. It was generally believed that Monksholme must have been built on the site of an old monastery, but no trace of any such building existed, except the name of the field, and the

fact that the little parish church of St. Bride's was close to it, while it was at least two miles, even by the fields, from the village.

The grandfather of the present owner was one of the many younger sons of a long established family, of some consequence in a neighbouring county. He married a woman of considerable fortune ; and as both he and his wife took a fancy to the situation of Monksholme, they bought the property, built a good modern house upon it, and settled there.

Neither Monksholme nor Throstlethwaite had any other neighbours of the same position in the world so near to them, and most fortunately the two families in each succeeding generation had been on terms of warm and intimate friendship.

The present Mr. Charteris, like Margaret L'Estrange, was an only child, and though he was twelve years older than she was, they

had been much together in early days ; for his mother was very fond of her, and she was often at Monksholme. The friendship between the two houses had continued unbroken up to the present time, and, as a natural consequence, Leonard Barrington and Frank L'Estrange had each found companions among the numerous children at Monksholme.

Agatha Charteris, who was the eldest, was three years older than Leonard, and had very early considered herself too womanly to join in the amusements which he shared with her two brothers, Edgar and Oswald. Ruth was next to Oswald, and was six years younger than Agatha. After her came three more boys, who were Frank's playfellows.

Agatha was a young lady in society while her sister was still a child, and was married before Ruth left the schoolroom, so that she was naturally thrown upon her brothers for

companionship. She was equally welcome to both the elder and younger divisions, for she had just the gifts which brothers most appreciate. She was pretty, and sweet-tempered, and she had health and spirits which made her, without being the least unfeminine, ready to join in most of their amusements. She was never in their way, and was often helpful.

The possibly inconvenient result of so great an intimacy with Leonard Barrington was, as is usually the case in such circumstances, never thought of until too late.

After Ruth left the schoolroom, Mrs. Charteris would probably have begun to be more prudent ; but during the first three years after that time, Leonard was scarcely ever in the neighbourhood, and it was not until he had come to Edenford the previous summer that any need for caution had suggested itself. Mrs. Charteris had then very quickly per-

ceived that it would not do at all to allow her pretty, lively, popular daughter to be on terms of sisterly intimacy with a handsome, attractive man of five-and-twenty, who was no relation to her; especially when she considered that he had no fortune whatever, and seemed particularly unlikely ever to make one. It was altogether awkward and puzzling.

Leonard was not only very often at Throstlethwaite, whence he could come to Monks-holme as much as he liked, but being well-connected, good-looking and pleasant, he was in great request in the society of the county. He was always a useful and welcome addition to a party, and was consequently to be met with everywhere, there being in general rather a dearth of young men. Mrs. Charteris certainly felt herself in a troublesome dilemma, in which she could hope for no help from any one. It was not by any means

an easy case to deal with. Leonard could not be said to flirt with Ruth, nor even to pay her any conspicuous attention, and Mr. Charteris would be certain to ridicule the idea of their being any need for caution, and to look upon any attempt to keep him at a distance not only as unfriendly, but as absurd and undignified; while any hint of warning to Ruth herself might only make matters worse, and perhaps even create the evil which her mother was wishing to avert. The only thing that Mrs. Charteris could do, she did promptly. She sent Ruth from home for a few weeks in the autumn, to pay some visits, trusting that in the winter, short days and bad weather might prevent such frequent meetings whenever Leonard came to Throsthwaite.

In November, however, Frank L'Estrange's illness began. This threw Ruth and Leonard together more than ever, and in a way which

it was equally impossible to prevent or control ; but at the same time it somewhat altered the case. It was very generally known that Frank could not recover, that his life was a question merely of months or weeks, and it was equally generally assumed that Leonard Barrington would take his place—for who else was there to do so ? If this were to be, Mrs. Charteris felt that no better match could be desired for Ruth, and that it would be most impolitic now to interpose any obstacle to their intercourse, which Leonard might resent afterwards.

Everything had therefore gone on as before, and, in consequence of the small worldly considerations which influenced Mrs. Charteris' mind, matters were now in a state as little likely as possible to conduce to the happiness of any one of the people concerned, for few positions are more trying than that in which Ruth and Leonard

were thus allowed to remain towards each other.

There was no acknowledged tie between them—no word of explanation had ever passed; and yet there was on both sides a tacit assumption of all that the most open mutual explanation could have expressed. Such a relationship, if rendered inevitable by circumstances, as it seemed to be in this case, is hard perhaps on both parties, though it can never be equally so, for it is certain to fall the hardest on whichever has the most generous nature. That one, whichever it may be, who gives without stint or thought of self, who loves the most deeply and truly, is sure to suffer the most constantly and the most keenly.

As yet, however, no shadow of future trouble had clouded Ruth's brightness. Ever since she could remember, she and Leonard had been friends and companions; there had

always been more perfect sympathy between them than between her and any of her brothers, dear to her though "the boys" were ; but she was no precocious woman of the world, or vulgar, self-conscious school-girl, and no thought of anything further had occurred to her before the time came when he had ceased to be with them. She had often missed him during the years that he was absent, and had gladly welcomed him on his return ; but the previous state of things between them could not last long unchanged.

Ruth had been for three years in society. She was generally admired and liked, and though she was as simple-hearted and unaffected as ever, she was by no means unobservant. That Leonard preferred her to others as decidedly as of old was obvious enough, and she very soon perceived that his preference now was of a totally different

kind. She felt that he loved her, and that he meant her to understand that he did, though he did not say so. Her judgment acquiesced in his silence as fully as her heart appreciated his affection. Of course, he could not speak—for if he were to do so, it must be avowed to her parents at once—which would entail their certain refusal of consent to entertain any such notion—a decree of separation—and all the annoying fuss usual on such occasions.

Till he had won something of a position for himself—till he could hold out some faint prospect of being able to support a wife—Ruth felt that he was wise to be silent, and to trust to her comprehension and faith, as she trusted to his. Of the possible change that Frank L'Estrange's death might make in his position, she had never thought.

Warmly attached to Mrs. L'Estrange, and

sincerely fond of Frank, her sympathies were so wholly with them, that the question of the future heirship of Throstlethwaite had never crossed her mind, and, just because she was in every way so nearly concerned in the matter, it had never been mentioned before her by friends and acquaintances. She had never even heard it alluded to in her own home, for her father, feeling warmly for his old friend's grief, and disliking painful subjects, had never spoken of it; and her mother, though fully alive to the importance of the question, as far as Leonard's chance of fortune was concerned, had thought silence the most judicious measure with regard to her daughter. She wished everything to be as undecided as possible, so as to be able in the future to take whatever line might seem to be the most desirable.

The general conviction, "all up and down,"

that "Miss Ruth and Mr. Leonard were to make a match of it," was certainly not weakened that Saturday afternoon at Throstlethwaite by their coming down from the house to the lake together.

Ruth was well known in the parish ; and while Leonard went on to make her boat ready for starting, she stopped to speak to the bark-peelers, and to make friendly inquiries after bedridden grandmothers and sick children. She had a cheerful word, too, for the busy carpenter and painter ; and then she passed on to the landing-place, quite unconscious that she was being looked upon as certain to be the future mistress of Throstlethwaite, but with a secret anxiety as to what was before her, which was as new as it was painful, and which only instinctive girlish pride prevented her from showing.

The walk from the house to the lake was very short, but it had sufficed to show her

that Leonard was more thoroughly out of sorts than she had ever seen him since their childish days.

She had noticed, even while gaily telling her story to Frank, that Leonard was annoyed—that he did not like what she had been doing—and she was half sorry, half amused. She knew that he objected strongly to women doing anything that could possibly excite remark—she had often laughed at him for being absurdly conventional—and she knew also that he was disposed to be unreasonably annoyed at her showing any attention to any other man, even though it were but a courtesy to a stranger.

She fully expected some half earnest, half playful, and wholly gratifying remonstrance as soon as they should be alone, and was prepared to defend herself in the same fashion ; but when Leonard walked by her side all the way to the lake in moody silence, she

was first surprised, and then hurt and indignant.

Long ago, she had been well accustomed to his occasional moods, and had always known how to manage them ; but in those days he had not had the same power to wound her. In the frankness of boy and girl intimacy, if he were cross and unreasonable, she would laugh at him, and scold him into good humour again. She could not do it now.

They had renewed their friendship, after a three years' separation, no longer as boy and girl, but as man and woman ; and the habits of early intimacy had served only to make the path to a mutual understanding shorter and smoother than it could otherwise have been. There had been none of the formality of a first acquaintance, no stiff barrier of reserve to pass on the way to confidence ; but there had been on Leonard's side, while

Ruth's affection was still to be won from rivals, all the deference, and courtesy, and delicate consideration likely to aid his cause, and which no one could show more gracefully and pleasantly.

This was the first occasion on which Ruth had been made to know how completely a girl's feelings are at the mercy of a man to whom she has accorded the position at once of an adopted brother, and of a tacitly accepted, though unacknowledged, lover. She has placed in his hands a fatal power to torture, which, if there is a flaw in the generosity of his nature, is certain to be used sooner or later; and if her instinct of womanly reserve is delicate, and her love is deep, she feels it equally impossible to remonstrate or retaliate.

When Ruth reached the end of the landing-place, Leonard was still in the boat, which he had freed from its fastenings and

made quite ready for starting ; but he had evidently not yet recovered his temper, for he did not speak, though he held out a hand to help her to step down from the little raised platform.

“Thanks ; good-bye !” said Ruth, very quietly, as she stood aside to allow him to leave the boat.

Painful though it might be to her to part in this way, she felt that Leonard’s displeasure was unreasonable and his manner unjustifiable, and her own temper was as independent as it was sweet. The strength of her affection, instead of blinding her to the truth, only made her more keenly sensitive to the pain which the perception of it could give. Though she could scarcely be said to *resent* his conduct, it would not have been possible to her to attempt to restore him to good humour by even the slightest approach to flattery.

Leonard's reply to her farewell was to take up the oars.

"I shall row you up to Monksholme," he said. "There is plenty of time for me to walk back before dinner, and you have certainly done quite enough, *if not too much*, already to-day."

"I have done nothing to tire me, thank you," replied Ruth, in the same coldly quiet tone, though with rapid changes of colour; "and, really, I would rather row myself home than have you for a boatman in your present state of mind."

She had broken the ice.

"You cannot wonder at my hating to hear of your doing such things," he exclaimed, impetuously, the moment she stopped speaking. "What would even Edgar say to your rowing off in that way with any confounded tramping snob who happened to carry a lame dog a few yards for you! And if *he*——"

His roughness hurt Ruth too deeply for the anger she might otherwise have felt; but she interrupted him quickly, in fear lest he should go so far as to make a quarrel inevitable.

“What Edgar might think or say has nothing to do with it, Leonard; and we will not talk about it. I see no harm in what I did. However, if I am in such deep disgrace for rowing one gentleman across the lake to-day, I should think that letting another row me home would only make matters worse—so good-bye.”

The pain which was betrayed by the tone of her voice, in spite of the effort she made to control it, touched Leonard, and conquered his ill-humour.

He laughed, as he gave a vigorous push with one oar against the landing, which sent the boat off at once several feet from the shore and into deep water.

"We'll set one against the other," he said, beginning to row, and answering her half-appealing glance with a smile, which was his only attempt at an apology, but which was at once accepted as atonement in full for his recent behaviour.

"But will not Frank want you—or Mrs. L'Estrange," suggested Ruth. "Of course, it is very pleasant that you should come—but ought you to leave them?"

"Frank always rests between tea and dinner," was Leonard's reply. "And as for Aunt Margaret—she has no thought now but one—no interest in anything except the fluctuations of that poor boy's illness."

"It would be very natural, surely, if it were so," said Ruth—"but I don't think it is. When such a terrible grief is hanging over her, I have often wondered how she can force herself to attend to business as she does. She seems to put aside nothing that

has any real claim upon her ; and I suppose you can help her sometimes."

" Sometimes—yes—but she does not want me now, I am sure ; and considering how long this has gone on, and may still go on, you must not grudge me an hour's pleasure, Ruth."

Ruth smiled.

" I am glad that there is anything which can lighten the pain of all this for you, ever so little. Of course it must be worse for you than for any one except Mrs. L'Estrange. It is all so unspeakably sad. Every one says there is no hope ; but sometimes when he is bright, as he was to-day, I cannot *help* hoping—it seems so impossible that his death can really have been decreed now, when his life is so precious to every one round him."

" The law of nature which rules the question of life or death can scarcely be said to

decree," replied Leonard. "It has no power of choice ; it is merely a case of——"

Ruth raised her hand with a deprecating gesture.

"Not now——" she entreated. "Don't let us talk our miserable metaphysics in the presence of such a reality as this sorrow. Its meaning, whatever it may be, lies far too deep for argument. There can be no scientific physical explanation of the existence of such suffering as *his mother's*, and one cannot help longing to know why it should be allowed——" She paused and for a minute or two there was silence—broken at length by Leonard's gently repeating with faultless tone and taste the stanzas from "In Memoriam" beginning with the lines—

"Oh yet we trust that somehow good
Shall be the final goal of ill"——

He could not have chosen a reply more

judiciously. Sense and sound both suited Ruth's mood exactly, and as his voice ceased she withdrew her eyes from the soft, mysterious, purple distance into which she had been gazing, and thanked him with a bright, sweet smile for the sympathy which she felt to be so complete, but of which the full perfection certainly existed only in her own imagination.

Not that it was by any means all intentional acting on Leonard's part. His intelligence was quick and well cultivated and all his superficial instincts were graceful and pleasant, so that when no undercurrent of temper or self-consideration stirred the ignoble side of his really shallow and selfish nature, he readily adopted the higher and purer tone suggested to him by another mind, and for the moment enjoyed the consciousness of its being his own.

From their childhood Ruth's presence had

always tended to bring out all that was best in him ; and this perhaps accounted not only for her affection for him, and for her ignorance of his faults, in spite of their having grown up together, but also for the truth and strength of his love for her. When with her, he was at peace with himself, being gifted with the comfortable power of forgetting all past failures and of ignoring the possibility of others in the future.

For a time after this, they were both silent. Ruth was pondering dreamily on the mysterious inequalities of human life. Why should she be so unspeakably happy—with a joy which not even her sympathy in the sorrow of others could really cloud—while Mrs. L'Estrange must lose what was to her the one ray of sunshine in her widowed life?

Leonard could scarcely be said to be thinking at all. For the moment he was only

pleasantly conscious of the bright side of his life, and gave himself up to the enjoyment of it, picturing to himself a future without troubles or difficulties, and with Ruth in all her fresh sweet grace for a constant companion. He accepted, with a careless sense of its being only his due, the brilliant prospect which he fancied was opening before him, without a thought that the same cause which was to bring all this sunshine to him must cast the darkest shadow upon the life of the aunt to whom he owed everything.

A railway whistle, distant, but shrill and distinct as it came over the water through the still evening air, startled them both from their dreams, and Ruth instinctively looked at her watch.

"Only a goods' train somewhere about,"—said Leonard carelessly. "It cannot be much after six."

"Five minutes," replied Ruth. "And the

train by which the Kennedys come is not due at Thornbeck till half past, so I have more time to spare than you have. We shall be at our landing in ten minutes more, but *you* will have three miles to walk home, while *I* have about a quarter of one."

"Aunt Margaret dines at half past seven so I shall have lots of time."

"If it is fine I suppose you will come up to church to-morrow, and then you will see Agatha."

Still under the influence of his recent dreams, and forgetting for the moment their utter unreality and the folly of alluding to them, Leonard answered. "I shall be glad to see her; and yet, Ruth, until quite lately I dreaded her return more than I can tell you."

"But why? You could not be afraid of her worrying you now about dirty boots or fishy hands, and if I remember right those

were your standard subjects of quarrel in former days?"

Leonard laughed.

"Not exactly. My recent fears were more serious. I dreaded lest her influence over Mrs. Charteris should be too strong for me—I feared that it might even affect *you*——"

Ruth's colour deepened to crimson as she answered :

"Agatha and I may very likely think differently on many subjects, but you ought to know better than to suppose me so very easily influenced without good reason."

"The reasons might once have seemed good and forcible enough," said Leonard. "It is different, now, and I do not think she will even wish to banish me—any more than your mother does—but still—it must all be uncertain for an indefinite time yet—and they

may think—. Ruth! will you *promise* me that they shall not persuade you to change—however long it may be before I can speak out, and we can acknowledge it all?”

Leonard's eyes and voice were admirably adapted to enforce such an appeal, and Ruth's heart responded to each pleading look and tone, but though her lips trembled a little she answered resolutely. “If we speak at all, Leonard, we must speak plainly.”

“I will speak as plainly as you could possibly desire, with the greatest pleasure,” began Leonard, playfully, looking up at her as he bent towards her in rowing.

But Ruth, though she could not refuse to smile, spoke quickly and gravely,—

“I do not mean nonsense, Leonard. I mean that I wish you had been content to let things go on as they were—trusting me, as I

would have trusted you, even through years of silent waiting."

"But, surely, a promise on both sides can do no harm," urged Leonard. "It will only relieve us from the horrible necessity of talking in riddles, or else keeping silence as to what most nearly concerns us. Everything may outwardly go on just the same as before; no one need know that there is any difference—there won't *be* any, except that we shall be perfectly open and true towards each other, and I shall not need to go half mad with jealousy if I fancy that Agatha is using all her influence in favour of——"

Ruth interrupted him,—

"That is absurd, Leonard, and you know it; and you know, too, that you ought not to try to persuade me into making a secret engagement. Oh! *why* did you not let things alone?"

Leonard had already repented his im-

prudence ; but by this time he was bent on having his own way, and was rather vexed by her opposition and her gentle reproaches.

“Don’t be missish and fantastically conscientious, Ruth,” he said. “It is quite unworthy of you to split hairs in that way. You have known for months that I loved you, and lived on the hope of making you my wife as soon as I could ; and now, just because I *say* so, you make all this fuss.”

Ruth’s colour went and came quickly, and her eyes filled with tears ; but she checked them, and forcibly steadied the quivering of her lips before she spoke.

“It is true that I understood you, and that I thanked you in my heart for making me understand ; but I answered you as plainly as you had spoken to me. I thought we understood each other, and that it was enough.”

Leonard attempted a protest, but she continued,—

“I thanked you also, quite as much, for the silence which spared me all difficulty about concealment. But now that you have spoken, what can I do?”

“Do? Why, give me the promise I ask, like the darling you are, and let everything go on quietly, just as it was doing before! To speak to your people now is impossible, of course—would be utterly ridiculous; there are things which *can't* be said yet; but you must have seen that no objection is ever made by anybody to our being together as much as ever we like.”

“I will make no promise of any kind that I am to keep secret,” replied Ruth, firmly. “Speak to papa if you like, and I will openly promise you to wait patiently for any number of years, and in spite of any amount of op-

position ; but I have been glad that you have thought it best not to do this, because I know all the fuss there would be, and that everything that could be done to separate us would be done. If papa is not to be told, I will neither make nor receive any promise whatever ; and you must not speak of it ever again until you can do so openly."

They were at the Monksholme landing by this time, and Ruth stepped from the boat as she spoke, while Leonard instinctively fastened its chain before he followed her.

"To ask me to speak to Mr. Charteris now, is simply babyish, Ruth," he said, angrily. "He himself would neither wish it nor expect it. It would make everything awkward. But it is absurd to make such a fuss about keeping the thing to ourselves just for a few months, or perhaps only weeks.

It cannot be more than that now before I shall be in a position when it will be easy to get it settled. Aunt Margaret is so fond of you that——”

Ruth for the first time perceived his meaning, and recoiled from him with a look which he found it difficult to forget. Something of the gulf between their natures was revealed to her at that moment.

Leonard, conscious that he had been foolish and rash, and had made a serious mistake, was angry with Ruth instead of with himself, and resented the instinctive disapprobation she had shown.

“It is for you to decide,” he said, impetuously. “Promise *now* that you will be my wife as soon as I can openly ask for you, or let us give it up. It is time to stop trifling.”

Ruth was very pale.

“I have never trifled,” she replied. “But

not even for you will I do what I know to be wrong."

Without another word, Leonard strode angrily away, and Ruth was left alone. She leaned against one of the posts on the landing-place and looked out over the lake, but she saw nothing. All the light seemed suddenly gone from that lovely sunset scene, and with it the unclouded joyousness of her girlhood; but she did not repent her decision, even if Leonard should accept it as final, for she knew that she had been right.

Her whole nature revolted from the idea of a secret engagement, depending for its fulfilment upon Frank L'Estrange's death. If it could only have been possible to forget that the idea had ever been presented to her mind! But though she turned from it with a sense of sickening shame, it haunted her incessantly, and it was only by a desperate

effort that she at last roused herself to walk home across the fields in time to meet the carriage at the door on its return from Thornbeck, if it should be punctual.

CHAPTER IV.

MONKSHOLME was a pleasant place of moderate size. The gardens and grounds were pretty and well kept, and the house was handsome, roomy, and comfortable. Well-suited to the fortune of its owner, there was no sense of effort anywhere, and everything about the establishment, both indoors and out, was in admirable order.

Mr. Charteris himself was an active, genial country gentleman, who had been from his youth one of the most popular men in his county. He was a sensible, useful magistrate, a kind and judicious landlord and

master, a good man of business and a fairly enlightened politician, with perhaps even rather fewer prejudices than might have been expected ; but he had little interest in literature, art, or science, and seldom read anything except newspapers, or sometimes an article in a magazine. His farm, his stable and his game provided ample occupation and amusement for his leisure hours. He was fond of his home and of his wife and children ; and was also a staunch, warm-hearted friend, most cheerfully and cordially sociable with all his neighbours, both high and low.

Mrs. Charteris was a pretty, lady-like woman, of a much smaller and poorer nature than her husband, but clever enough to be pleasant and successful in daily life. Her household was quietly and admirably managed ; her children were well brought up ; and her parties, of whatever kind, were never failures. She was a thoroughly good wife

and mistress, something of a slave to her handsome, spirited boys, and a kind, though somewhat arbitrary, mother and chaperon to her daughters.

The young people of the family were much what might have been expected. They inherited good constitutions, good looks, and good tempers from their ancestors. The boys were all essentially well-conducted, and none of them had given their parents any serious trouble. They all had a decided preference for pleasure over work, and an apparently unlimited appetite for sport; but they had sense enough to see that, as Providence *had* made the mistake of so arranging the world that life (especially for younger brothers) could not be a perpetual holiday, it was necessary to exert themselves; and as they had all fair abilities, and a good deal of conscience as to honest work, they were getting on well in their respective lines.

Edgar was in the army, and was now in Ireland with his regiment ; Oswald was a clerk in one of the Government offices ; Jack was just gone to Australia, where a brother of his mother's was a prosperous settler ; George was at sea ; and Bob, a boy of seventeen, was still at Eton, with his future destination as yet unsettled, and with no present ambition so engrossing as that of being in the eleven for the year, and distinguishing himself at Lord's.

Agatha very much resembled her mother both in appearance and character, only with the added charm of the true Charteris sunny temper and bright spirits. She had married early and well.

Many circumstances had tended to make Ruth in some ways unlike the rest of her family. Her temperament was probably different to begin with, and though she had ostensibly been educated in exactly the same

way as her sister, the accidental impulses given to the development of her mind and character had all tended to increase that difference. Leonard Barrington had unquestionably had much to do with it. He was, both as a boy and a young man, intensely modern in mind and tastes, and Ruth had always been the confidante of the various phases through which he had passed. He was quick and impressionable, and had taken an interest, temporary it might be, but genuine as far as it went, in almost every conceivable subject. In each succeeding school or college vacation, Ruth had heard his ideas and suggestions, crude and superficial enough, no doubt, but bright and inspiring for the time. With more perseverance than he had, and fewer distractions, Ruth, when left to herself during the school terms, acquired the habit of pondering over past discussions and ferreting out books

which referred to them, and thus quietly trying to enlighten herself upon questions which her governess would have stared to think should occupy her pupil's mind.

Her father would have laughed at her, and her mother would have forbidden such waste of time, had they known what she did ; but with an instinctive shrinking from unsympathizing comments, she never spoke of the thoughts and fancies which filled her mind. From Leonard she received no help whatever beyond the original suggestions which gave her the impulse to use her own powers, for in all likelihood when another vacation again threw them together, he was under the influence of some totally different school of thought, or engrossed in some study of another kind, and had neither interest nor attention to bestow on what she had been doing.

Ruth, of course, practised the necessary

feminine self-suppression, accepted his capricious changes of interest as so many signs of progress, and tried, in puzzled admiration, to follow him in what she believed to be his rapid growth. That the result in her mind was chaotic may easily be believed; but fortunately for her when she was about seventeen an accidental conversation revealed the state of things to Mrs. L'Estrange. Being herself a well read woman of vigorous understanding, with a keen interest in the progress of almost every branch of human knowledge, she delighted in helping a bright girl forward, and gave in full measure the sympathy and encouragement which, in spite of the truest family affection and confidence, were not (because they could not be) forthcoming in her own home.

Thus it happened that Ruth, though she could ride and row and dance and laugh and generally enjoy life as a true Charteris ought,

had another and a deeper side of mind and character. She felt, and with some truth, that she owed this to Leonard's influence ; and thus he was placed in her imagination on a false pedestal, and was loved with an admiring gratitude which was wholly undeserved.

The train by which the Kennedys came was unusually late that day. It did not reach Thornbeck till after seven, so that it was fully eight before they were all at Monksholme. The evening was short, and though Ruth mentioned her afternoon adventures, she was scarcely attended to, and her tired, pre-occupied looks passed almost unnoticed. There was time for little more than the observation that Agatha was as pretty as ever and apparently as lively, and that her husband was just what Ruth remembered him, plain but rather distinguished looking, and so quiet and silent as to appear

considerably more his wife's senior than he really was. On the whole, however, Ruth was favourably impressed by the brother-in-law whom she had expected to find so formidable, and ceased to dread having him to entertain.

Just before the party dispersed for the night, a small parcel of books was given to Ruth, with the information that Michael Hodgson had been over to see his daughter, and had brought this back with him.

Michael Hodgson was the Monksholme gamekeeper, and his daughter Dinah was dairymaid at Throstlethwaite.

Mrs. L'Estrange so constantly sent Ruth books, that no comments were made, and Ruth herself carried the parcel upstairs, and placed it on her table unopened. It remained there even after the maid was gone and she was alone; for she felt little inclination to open it, or to do anything except

think fruitlessly of those last ten minutes on the lake, and long to recall them.

She did not regret her refusal to give a secret promise, for she knew that she had done right ; but she felt that if she had refused less abruptly, if she had been less self-asserting and less reproachful, she might have been able to avoid annoying Leonard so much as to make him leave her in anger. She did not for a moment imagine that this estrangement would last, but it was intensely painful to her for the time ; and she felt that a frequent repetition of such scenes would be almost more than she could bear, while she saw that it would be most difficult to keep clear of them, if Leonard allowed himself to be tormented by jealous fancies. It was really too foolish and unreasonable of him ; but still, accepting it as a proof of affection, Ruth could not be very indignant with him for it.

Many excuses for his whole conduct had already presented themselves to her mind, and found ready admission. Of course he ought not to have asked her to make a secret engagement—but then men were always impatient. She supposed that it was really much more difficult for him to wait and trust in silence than it was for her; according to her experience, men never *would* wait quietly for *anything*, unless they could fill up the time by taking some active steps to gain it—passive silent patience was utterly repugnant to them; and if this were so, of course she could not be surprised at Leonard's having passing moods of unreasonable irritability.

She wished most heartily that he had not allowed her to see that he was counting upon succeeding to Throstlethwaite, for the thought of entertaining such a hope was hateful to her; and yet, once made conscious

of such a possible solution of all their difficulties, she could not forget it. Of course, it was only natural that men should always see the matter-of-fact business side of life, instead of being wholly engrossed by sympathy with sorrow, and the probable future fate of so large and important a property could not be overlooked by them when once it was known that Frank L'Estrange could not recover.

If the question were to be considered at all, it certainly seemed natural and probable that Leonard should take Frank's place, and Ruth could not help feeling how easy everything would be for them then. She thought, too, how glad she should be to have almost a daughter's right to devote herself to doing all that could be done to cheer and brighten Mrs. L'Estrange's life; and then she suddenly recoiled from the picture she had allowed her imagination to draw. It seemed too horribly selfish to build castles in the air

for future happiness, of which the foundations must rise from such a depth of sorrow.

Wearied with these thoughts, Ruth at length opened the parcel of books, doing it mechanically, and without any real interest. She found, on looking at it, that the address was written by Leonard, and that it contained a couple of French books, which Mrs. L'Estrange had promised to lend to her.

There was also the following note :—

“A blessed chance for me! Michael Hodgson sends in to ask if there is any message for Monksholme, and Aunt Margaret tells me to find these books and send them to you. I can write what I might not have found it easy to say to-morrow. I was a brute to you this afternoon, I know—but you *don't*—you *can't* understand half how

intolerable it is to me to be unable to claim you openly—to feel that all the world has as much right as I have to your attention. Still—you were right, and I was wrong from beginning to end—but you will be generous, my dearest, as you always are. Forgive me and forget it all—let everything be as it was before—have it your own way, and I will bear it as best I may. I will ask nothing more that you cannot grant. I will be content with the certainty which your words this afternoon gave me—that you are, and always will be, my guardian angel—that your love is mine, and will not be turned from me—though for a time it must be silent—as I will force myself to make mine, because I am so wholly yours, that at your bidding I will accept silence as all-sufficient and most precious speech. I shall see you to-morrow, and know that I am forgiven.

“L. B.”

This note, hastily written, carelessly blotted and scarcely legible, fully restored Ruth's peace for the time. She, perhaps not unnaturally, dwelt only on the affection expressed by every word—on the candour of Leonard's acknowledgment of having been wrong—on his frank admission that she was right—and on his concession to her that everything should be as it had been before.

She was touched and grateful, and allowed herself to be blind to the fact that in reality he assumed all that she had refused to grant, and that though he said—"Let everything be as it was before," his letter was really little more than an apology for his own ill-temper, and an echo of her words to him, so repeated, however, as to constitute very much the sort of secret engagement for which he had asked. She did not think of this, and she did not foresee the difficulties in which it might involve her in the future. He wrote,

—"Forgive me, and forget it all." To forgive was easy, and she did not remember that to forget might be impossible.

Ruth might, perhaps, do Leonard more than justice, and credit him in her imagination with qualities which he was very far indeed from possessing; but that letter was, as far as it went, a perfectly genuine expression of his feelings at the moment. He was quite incapable of seeing the question of their making a secret engagement from her point of view, and he could not understand her romantic aversion to taking the chance of his succession to Throstlethwaite into consideration between themselves. Of course it was one of those things which could not be spoken of publicly—good taste and good policy alike decreed that it must be absolutely ignored to the outer world—but not to think of it was impossible, and not to acknowledge to each other that they did so was absurd.

He admitted to himself, however, that to be even absurdly scrupulous about such things was a good point in a woman's character, though one which might sometimes be tiresome, and his irritation gradually subsided. He was selfish, wilful and impatient, but he was affectionate, and it was intolerable to him that any coolness between himself and Ruth should continue. He was man enough and gentleman enough to feel that he had given her very just cause for indignation by his manner in the earlier part of the afternoon, and he had also knowledge enough of her character to be sure that however much she might suffer in consequence of their quarrel, she would not yield on any point which she considered a question of conscience.

He really loved Ruth as well as he was capable of loving any one—in other words, her affection and sympathy were absolutely necessary to him; he could not calmly con-

template the possible loss of what was so precious to him, and was vexed with himself for having allowed his temper to lead him into treating her in a way which might risk all that he had gained during the last few months. Under the influence of these feelings he dashed off the note which Ruth received with the parcel of books; and instinct guided him well, for it produced upon her mind exactly the impression he desired. The mixture of tenderness and contrition expressed in it touched her deeply; while its tone of impetuous feeling, carefully restrained as she thought out of consideration for her, laid a spell upon her which she could not resist.

For the time she felt as if the fault had been chiefly hers. The position in which they stood towards each other had been more trying to him than she had understood, and she felt that *she* had been to blame in the

first place for causing his fit of irritable jealousy by a careless want of consideration for what she might have known, had she thought for a moment, would be his wishes. She ought to have sent one of the men to row the stranger over the lake to Carlsgill and have waited to make her own expedition to Throstlethwaite until he returned, as only one boat was as yet ready for use.

She ought not to have gone on making fun out of the story with Frank, when she saw that Leonard was annoyed by it ; and afterwards, when he could not conceal his vexation, she ought—even though she felt it to be unreasonable—to have borne it with patient forbearance instead of being quick to resent it, since it arose only from the love for her which was the great happiness of her life.

This, as has been already seen, was the mood in which the end of the day's events left Ruth.

Leonard, having despatched his peace-making note, thought no more about it. He had done all that could possibly have been expected of him, and he had not a doubt of the result. He knew the generous nature he had to deal with, even if he did not appreciate it, and he was sure that Ruth would meet him after church the next morning with the sweet trusting smile and conscious blush which in its half shy grace was so peculiarly becoming to her, and in its acknowledgment of his power was so pleasant to him. She would be more surely his own than ever after this passing difference, and, therefore, on the whole, perhaps, it was not to be regretted.

CHAPTER V.

AMONG the minor troubles which had helped to increase the weight of Mrs. L'Estrange's sorrow during the last few weeks, the most serious had been the gradually increasing illness of her agent.

Mr. Bailey had been her father's steward almost ever since she could remember, and had continued to hold the same office under her husband ; but during the five years since his death she had found that the old man was scarcely equal to all that was required for the care of the property in its present enlarged state, for since the discovery of the iron,

which had brought in large sums of money, she had made many purchases of land.

She had felt more than once that she should have been glad to have a younger and more active and competent man in his place ; some one of higher education and wider views would be more useful to her ; she had however, far too thorough and grateful an appreciation of the life-long service of the old man to think of suggesting that he should resign.

She was quite aware, too, that though he might be a little narrow and prejudiced and averse to modern innovations, his strict integrity, his devotion to the interest of his employers, and his careful business habits, were truly valuable qualities, amply atoning for some troublesome deficiencies. His failing health during the last month or two, had added greatly to Mrs. L'Estrange's anxieties, and had thrown upon her even

more business than usual at a time when she could scarcely bring herself to think of anything but her dying boy. The task of attending to the management of the property which he was never to inherit had been a daily torture.

Mr. Bailey died, somewhat suddenly, that Saturday afternoon, and the fact was known at Throstlethwaite by dinner-time, causing a good deal of excitement in the household. He had been a kindly, just, and unpretending man, and was generally respected and liked. The servants were sorry that he was gone, and thought it hard upon their mistress that she should have the worry of getting a new steward at such a time as this.

Mrs. L'Estrange herself felt and expressed very sincere regret ; Frank and Leonard were both startled and sorry ; and the evening had been spent in unusual silence. The question of the choice of a successor

was not mentioned, though as was seen the next morning, it occupied the minds of all three.

Frank had never got up to breakfast since his illness ; it was taken to him in his own room ; and it had come to be an established rule that old Daniel should go up to see him every morning at that time. He gave a daily report of stable matters, a subject of course of unfailing interest to them both, and usually had also some bit of village news to impart or to discuss.

On Sunday morning Mr. Bailey's death naturally took precedence of all other topics.

"You'll have heard that Mr. Bailey's gone, sir?" was Daniel's beginning.

"Yes. I'm awfully sorry, Daniel, and so is everybody about, I'm sure. He was a kind old man."

"Ay. He was a good old chap, tak' him

one way with another, and a deal o' folk 'll miss him badly. You'd not have thought t' end was that near ; though he's been nowt like t' man he used to be, this long time back. It's summat like t' old brown mare last summer—I thought she'd a good two or three year more o' quiet, easy work left in her, and then early on in t' back end she went right off one day, and we found her `lyin' dead in yon corner o' t' field."

Frank could scarcely help a smile at the comparison, but he answered gravely. "I am the most sorry for my mother, Daniel. This will be a great loss to her. I hardly know how she will ever do without him."

"T' man as can't be done without's a chap as has got to be born yet, I'm thinkin', sir!" replied Daniel, whose natural instinct was always to differ from whatever was said to him. "It's like them holes t' bairns digs by t'

sea—next day there's no findin' even where t' place was!"

"I suppose that's true, Daniel, but it's rather hard lines for a man who has worked for other people all his life, up to the very last, to feel that when he dies he won't even be missed."

"He's safe to be missed—is old Bailey—" was the inconsistent answer. "Good men's scarce now-a-days, and a steward in a place like this has a deal o' power, even when there's a missis like ours. It's a pity he's gone yet a bit."

"Yes. If he had only lived a few years longer, I could have helped my mother so much that having a new man wouldn't have been half the bother for her. But now, as soon as I am well again I must go up to Oxford, and I shan't be much here for two or three years. I wish this had not happened just now."

"Well, Mr. Frank! Any way it's a good job for a man hissel' to go while he's like to be missed and wanted back, instead of hangin' on ever so long, half doitin' like, and that tiddious that everybody's wishin' they were well shot of him!"

Mrs. L'Estrange came in at this moment on her way down stairs. Her first visit to Frank was always made at a much earlier hour, but she never failed to look in upon him again before going down to breakfast. Her entrance now naturally changed the subject of conversation and suggested other ideas to Frank's mind.

"How are you going to church, mother?" he exclaimed. "It is so beautiful again to-day, that if the carriage came back for once, instead of putting up at Monksholme, I might come in it for you after service. I should so like it!"

Mrs. L'Estrange saw no reason for oppos-

ing his wish. The day was lovely, the drive could not hurt him. "Very well, dear," she said. "If Daniel and the horses don't mind the double journey, I think it would be a very good plan."

Daniel's spirit of contradiction vanished before a wish of Frank's, and he at once declared that the horses "would be all the better for a deal more work than they got."

"And you think it is sure to keep fine?"

"It's only t' second day like, ma'am, and these queer fits of summer always comes for three. There's not a cloud about."

"Don't croak, mother," said Frank. "I'm sure we've had rain enough lately to last a while! It *must* have all come down!"

"Ay! one would think they mun be clean out o' stuff up yonder after all they've sent us!" said Daniel. "But it's a fine, deep well, is yon!"

"It all goes up again by evaporation, you know," Frank explained with a smile.

"Mebbes it may, sir. It's not for me to say it doesn't. There's a many queer fancies astir now-a-days, and one here and there'll m'appen be true. Any way t' moon was out of her first quarter yesterday and a change in t' weather then's sartin sure to hold, whatever Mr. Campbell says!"

"Mr. Campbell" was the head gardener—a newcomer and rather a pedantic young Scotchman—whose tendency to self assertion occasionally clashed with Daniel's prejudices.

"Does Campbell not believe in the moon?" asked Frank, exchanging a smile with his mother as she left the room.

"Not a bit, sir. When I said to him yesterday what I said just now—'Daniel,' says he, 'you're behind the time—talkin' of the moon's quarters. You haven't got no acquaintance with science.' 'And what'n

a chap may *he* be ?" says I. "But if yon's t' sort o' silly like stuff he talks, I'm none that much worse of not knowin' him !"

Frank laughed. "No worse at all, Daniel ! But now, tell me how Bayard's cold is getting on. I hope to ride again soon, and I want his wind to be all right."

"Bayard's all right again, sir. The chestnut colt was coughin' a bit this morning, but nothin' much to mind about."

"Do you think the stable doesn't get too hot this weather ? Leonard said the thermometer yesterday evening stood at——"

The mention of Leonard in reference to stable matters had always much the same effect on Daniel as a scarlet shawl on an old bull. The temperature of his stable, too, was a tender point, as Frank well knew, for not even he could succeed in getting it kept as it ought to be. "Mr. Leonard's head's

just stuffed that full o' fancies that there's no doin' with him ! If a man can't tell when his stable's over cold or hot, without a bit measurin' glass stuck up afore his nose, he'd best keep out o' t' road, and not set up for a coachman ! Never you fear, Mr, Frank, the horses shan't take no harm so long as I'm spared. And now I should be going to my work. Shall I ring first for Palmer to come to dress you, sir ?"

Frank acquiesced, and Daniel departed. When Mrs. L'Estrange came in again before starting for church, Frank was up and dressed and had had his chair placed near the window. He was looking quite as bright as he had done the day before, and turned eagerly towards his mother as she entered.

"That's right !" he exclaimed. "There's lots of time still before you need go, and I have something to say. I don't often help

you, mother, but I've got a splendid idea now ! You'll have to find somebody to take poor old Bailey's place ?"

"Yes. As soon as I can. In some ways he will be very difficult to replace ; but I think it will be wise now to have some one of a different kind—an educated gentleman in fact. I must consider about it."

"I thought you would want that now, mother ; and first I thought about Leonard. It would be such a capital way to give him an income, and let him set up with Ruth ; but I suppose he could hardly do the work."

"The idea occurred to me, too, Frank, but only to be rejected at once. Leonard would be quite unfit for such a place. We must have a man of some experience and weight of character, as well as one trained to the sort of business."

"Exactly. And I have thought of one. If only we could find Stephen Powys !"

"Find *whom*, my dear?" said Mrs. L'Estrange, looking thoroughly puzzled.

"Stephen Powys, mother. Don't you recollect about him? He was the big brother who came to see after Dick Powys when he and I had the scarlet fever together at old Morgan's, long ago—and he took us both to Llandudno afterwards. You and papa were abroad and couldn't come, you know; and he looked after me as well as Dick, because we wouldn't be separated."

"I remember," replied Mrs. L'Estrange. "He was very kind to you, and your head was full of him for a long time—you were always quoting him on every possible occasion. They were to have come to stay here the next summer, but your little friend was drowned in bathing, and that put an end to it all. But what has he to do with our present difficulty about an agent?"

"Well, you know, his father was a great

banker at Chelsfield, and they had a beautiful place somewhere in the country, and were biggish people ; but not long after Dick was drowned the bank broke, and the father died, and there was a general smash. They were full of it at the time at old Morgan's, and I remember how I longed to write and tell Stephen how awfully sorry I was ; but I was such a little chap—only eleven, you know—and he was grown up, and I thought he would think it cheeky. Anyhow, I didn't do it, and by degrees I forgot all about it till this last summer, when I met a fellow at Lord's who used to be at Morgan's with us. He spoke about the Powyses, and he told me about the time when old Powys died, and said Stephen had behaved like a brick, and that he and his mother had given up everything—things they needn't, I mean—to pay all the debts ; and he had worked hard ever since, and had entirely supported his mother.

It was just what he would do. I never came across anybody like him, and I *should* be so glad to see him again! I am sure he would make you a capital agent, and you could pay him well, and it would be first-rate for me to have him about."

"My dear boy, you take one's breath away! If you really wish so much to see Mr. Powys, of course I shall be delighted to ask him to come here, if you can tell me where to find him. But the appointment of an agent is not a thing to play with, Frank—it is a serious responsibility; and I cannot see any grounds for supposing that he would either wish for such an office, or be fitted for it."

"But you can inquire, and keep it open until you have found out all about him. It is a real inspiration, mother, I assure you! I *know* he would do, and I have set my heart on your having him!"

Mrs. L'Estrange smiled, though with an effort.

"You are tiring yourself, my boy, with all this talking. If you are really in earnest in wishing it so much, of course I will inquire. But where? And of whom?"

"Ainslie did not know his address, and he was going off to India almost directly, so he couldn't get it for me; but he said the way *he* knew about Stephen was from a cousin of his own, who had been a friend of his both at Harrow and Cambridge, and who still heard from him now and then. This man's a barrister, and lives in the Temple somewhere, and I've got his name and address. Ainslie wrote it down for me. His cousin wasn't in town then, so I couldn't go and inquire, but I meant to do it when I went up to Oxford; only then came this bothering illness, and I've never stirred since. Ainslie said he was sure his cousin would know

where Stephen was, and would tell me how to find him. He fancied he lived somewhere down in Devonshire, and was something like a bailiff, but he didn't know exactly. So you see, mother, it isn't just nonsense."

Frank had evidently seized on the idea with the pertinacity of illness, and his mother would not oppose him. To make the inquiry would be easy, and though probably it would lead to nothing, it would interest and please him to have it done.

"Well, then, we will write to this cousin of Ainslie's, and see what he can tell us," she said. "Only, my darling, you must remember that an agent has real and important duties, and great power over numbers of people, and I cannot appoint one lightly."

"All right," was Frank's answer. "I'm quite sure that Stephen Powys, if he can be found, will bear any amount of investigation."

Only, mother, don't *write*. Letters go on so slowly, and say so little; you never get to the end of anything. Send Leonard up. I'll give him the address of this man, and he can hear all *he* can tell, and then go down to the Land's End, if necessary, and see Stephen himself; and in that way you will know all there is to know in no time. *Do*, mother! It *can* do no harm, you know. Leonard will enjoy the lark, and so shall I at second hand—though it *is* rather ignominious to be stupid and helpless so long, instead of being able to go with him!"

The cheerful sweetness with which Frank bore his invalidism was very touching, while his firm conviction that health and strength must soon return was unspeakably sad.

His mother bent fondly over him, resolving that any pleasure which she could possibly [give him should be given without delay.

"It is a romantic fancy, dear boy!" she said with a smile. "But romance sometimes turns out very good common sense. It shall be as you wish. We will settle all about it this afternoon. I will get Mr. Nichols to give Leonard a few days leave, and he shall go on this wonderful quest, which we will hope won't prove a wild goose chase! Did you say anything about it to him when he was with you this morning?"

"Of course not, till I had spoken to you. There's the carriage coming round!" And Frank's attention was instantly given to the window, from which he could see the front door and inspect the horses now standing there.

Mrs. L'Estrange wondered whether any idea that he himself might take the place of her agent had crossed Leonard's mind. She saw by the slight shadow which passed over his face when, during their drive to the

church, she told him of Frank's scheme, that he *had* thought of it, but he made no remark except that it would be a great pity to thwart Frank, and that he should be very glad to go and find out all he could.

"Asking questions binds you to nothing, Aunt Margaret, and it need not even cause any delay, for you can easily inquire in other directions at the same time. If you will arrange it with Nichols, I will go as soon as ever you like. Of course though, it is a great chance that you may be able to do what Frank wishes."

"I have prepared him for that," replied his aunt promptly. "I explained to him that I could not treat the agency as a toy to be given either at my caprice or his. I must find the best man I can, and he must be some one with a thorough knowledge of business and considerable experience in the world. I want the help of an agent whose

character would give him influence over the people, and on whose judgment I could depend."

She spoke quietly, but with the intention of being understood, and she saw that Leonard did understand. He could not prevent a sudden though slight flush from betraying his consciousness of her meaning. He answered, however, quite readily. "Yes. This property ought to have a thoroughly capable agent. It is far too much for you without really good help, and I fancy that can only be had from men trained to the work."

His aunt was pleased with him for bearing the disappointment so well, and for his readiness to promote Frank's pleasure, but in truth the disappointment was only momentary. He had thought at first that to be appointed to the agency would be pleasant enough, for he was tired of his monotonous

work at the Bank in Edenford and would have enjoyed the necessary riding about the country, and the freedom which the change would have given him. It would have been a gratifying mark of his aunt's confidence, too, and, as such, very useful to him; it would also have provided him with an income and a house, and would have made an open engagement with Ruth Charteris quite possible. To set against all this, the work would have been hard—much harder than he liked. He felt that it would be infinitely pleasanter to him to be *merely* the heir—as Frank would have been—with a suitable allowance and a home at Throstlethwaite for himself and Ruth, instead of being expected to do the agent's work. Leonard hated "drudgery," as he called steady work of any kind, and thus he reconciled himself to Mrs. L'Estrange's present decision, almost as soon as it was known to him.

The immediate income was a loss, but one scarcely worth considering, and the fact of his being sent to make inquiries about a new agent—of such an apparently important errand as this being entrusted to him—would certainly be generally looked upon as almost an acknowledgment of his claim to succeed to Frank's place. Apart, however, from all such thoughts of himself, Leonard was really good-natured, and was very glad to help in giving the poor boy any gratification that seemed possible. He would have done it even at some sacrifice of his own pleasure, but fortunately none was required. An expedition at this time of the year to London, and then to Devonshire or Cornwall, with all his expenses paid, would be a very acceptable break in his Edenford life, and really, as Frank had called it, "a lark" which he should heartily enjoy.

CHAPTER VI.

WHEN Mrs. L'Estrange and Leonard arrived at the little church of St. Bride's, the Monksholme party were already in their places ; but when the service was over and the congregation had dispersed, the two families left the church together. The Throstle-thwaite carriage, which was usually put up at Monksholme during the service, so that they all walked up to the house together, was to-day waiting just outside the gates of the church-yard, and Frank was in it, with his wraps and cushions as carefully arranged as if his mother herself had been there to attend

to them. Daniel had drawn up the carriage, which was open, in the full warm sunshine, where there was shelter from even the light breeze that was stirring, and at a judicious distance from the path along which every one must pass, so that Frank need not speak to the people unless he liked.

The congregation was composed chiefly of country people, who had known him from his birth, but they passed on with only a friendly salutation, except in one or two cases where he signed to an old servant, or to some farmer better known than the rest, to come and speak to him. It was the first time that he had been seen outside the gates of Throstlethwaite since his illness began, for it had been a wet and chilly spring, and his appearance excited a great deal of interest. Much true sympathy was expressed in homely language as the different groups dispersed in various directions over the fields

on their way home. The women felt for his mother, while the men regretted the loss of the fine boy who seemed likely to have made so good a master and landlord.

"Well! Frank, my boy! I'm glad to see you out again," said Mr. Charteris cheerily, as he went up to the carriage. "Are you coming up to Monksholme to luncheon with us?"

"Oh! thanks! But I'm afraid the mere idea would give mother a fit!" was Frank's response, with the natural boyish instinct of mockery of his mother's anxious care of him. "I hope I shall be riding again soon and then I'll turn up, but I expect she'll think to-day that I ought to go to bed directly I get back after this wonderful exertion! Oh! there's Agatha!" he added as Mrs. Kennedy came up to her father's side. "I declare you don't look a bit different or a day older!"

"It would be no compliment to say the same thing to you," she replied laughing, "for you were quite a small boy when I went away! But you must talk to Nigel, not to me, about my trick of looking as if I couldn't get out of my teens! *He* pretends to be pleased when people take me for his daughter, but *my* ambition is to look like a dignified matron, so let me introduce you to my eldest daughter."

She lifted up a pretty little girl of five years old as she spoke, and desired her to shake hands with Frank. "I'll bring the other three over to see you some day!" she added.

Little Ethel was, however, rather alarmed by Frank's pale face and sharpened features, and shrank back. Her mother, with quick tact, put her down instantly, saying, "There! Run away, silly child! Gentlemen never want to be troubled with shy little girls."

“I don’t wonder I scared her,” said Frank, good-naturedly. “I know I look a horrible object. We’ll manage better when you bring them all over to Throstlethwaite. How is Quiz this morning, Ruth?”

Ruth was standing silently by the carriage while her parents and Colonel Kennedy were talking to Mrs. L’Estrange a few paces off, and Leonard was attending to the Vicar, who had joined the group. Leonard had made no attempt to engross Ruth; after the first greeting, they had, in fact, scarcely spoken to each other—for words were not needed between them, and, *indéed*, could not have been conveniently exchanged. Ruth, when thus appealed to, gave a report of Quiz, but it was not easy to her to be gay and unconstrained as she answered. She could not shake off the recollection of all that had been suggested to her mind, and it made her feel miserably treacherous and guilty towards the

poor boy, who was as openly and unaffectedly fond of her as if she had been really his sister, and who showed such thorough confidence in her affection.

Frank's attention was, however, now caught by the conversation going on among the elders about Mr. Bailey's death and the choice of a successor. He raised his voice. "Has mother told you my plan, Mr. Charteris?" he said. "And what do you say to it?"

The whole party drew nearer to the carriage as Mr. Charteris answered Frank's appeal.

"It is rather romantic, I think, Frank, and not very likely to come to anything. But it can do no harm for Leonard to go in search of your friend; and even if he doesn't find an agent for your mother, he may find a pleasant guest to enliven you."

"If he finds Stephen Powys, and he is to be had as an agent, I am sure we may think

ourselves awfully lucky!" replied Frank, resolutely.

"Powys!" said Colonel Kennedy. "Is the man you have been speaking of that young Powys of Chelsfield, the son of the banker who came to grief some years ago?"

"Yes," answered Mrs. L'Estrange. "His little brother was at school with my boy long ago, and their childish admiration for this elder brother was something of hero worship."

"And with very fair justification, I should fancy," said Colonel Kennedy.

"You know him? Can you tell us where he is?" cried Frank, with eager interest.

"Not in the least, I am sorry to say," was the reply. "I knew him slightly seven years ago, and thought him a very fine young fellow. My regiment was at Chelsfield when the bank smashed, and, of course, it was the

talk of the neighbourhood for the time. Young Powys came out uncommonly well, I remember ; and if he has grown up according to his promise then, and can be found, and is at liberty, I should think that you will be well repaid for the trouble of looking for him."

"But do you really know nothing of what became of him, or of where he is likely to be?" asked Frank.

"Really nothing. We were just leaving Chelsfield, and I have not happened to hear anything of him since. I have been very little in England, you know. I remember hearing at the time—and it was the only fault people seemed able to find—that he had refused one or two rather good offers of help, and was carrying his independence farther than was quite rational or quite worthy of him. He seemed bent on fighting his own way, out of sight; and it was thought a pity, I

know, that he should waste his powers in obscure drudgery to earn daily bread, when more than one good start in a promising career was offered to him."

"That certainly sounds more like a would-be hero than a man of good sense and knowledge of the world," said Mr. Charteris. "But never mind, Frank. Have the hero fished up, by all means, and then we will sit in judgment on him, and see if he has got over his heroics, and settled down into common-sense enough to be the right man for your mother."

Mrs. L'Estrange had turned to speak to the Vicar, and to offer him a seat in the carriage as far as the village, near which his house was, so that she did not hear this ; and Ruth thought that she herself was the only one who saw the slight shadow of disappointment which clouded Frank's eyes for a moment. With the quickened sensitiveness produced by

illness, he felt that Mr. Charteris was only good-naturedly humouring what he really thought a foolish whim, and that his view was probably shared by all the others. The cheery bluntness which was meant so well, had somehow jarred Frank's nerves, as even the faintest touch of ridicule always does jar any strong feeling.

Quite unconscious of what he had done, Mr. Charteris moved a few steps away, and began to speak to Daniel about the horses.

Ruth, instinctively guessing that if her sister were to say anything on the same subject she might most innocently make matters worse, was about to speak herself, when to her surprise, Colonel Kennedy, leaning quietly on the door of the carriage, said, as if he were merely continuing the conversation,—

“I don't fancy young Powys was a ‘would-be’ anything. False heroism of that sort is

apt to commend itself to very young men with great qualities, but who are still in the rough."

Frank, gratified by this respectful treatment of his fancy, answered, with a smile,—

"But why should it be *false* heroism? Surely, to bear your own burdens without any fuss about them is the best thing that can be done in such a fix?"

"Yes; even if your burden were to be that of submitting to be unwillingly indebted to other people," replied Colonel Kennedy "In calling it false heroism, I must own that I was begging the question rather unwarrantably, perhaps; for I was assuming that the facts were such as they were generally reported. The right or the wrong in such cases depends, of course, entirely upon the circumstances; but if a young man with noble gifts, from some impulse of pride or bitterness, rejects the help which would enable

him to use those powers to the utmost, don't you think he is taking rather a serious responsibility upon himself?"

"It would not have occurred to me," said Frank, with his boyish ingenuousness. "One doesn't think about things in that way, you know."

"You shirked the sermon *in* church, Frank," here interposed Mrs. Kennedy; "but you see you are not to be allowed to escape. It isn't fair, Nigel, really!"

"I like it," said Frank, quickly. "But you know, Colonel Kennedy, if one didn't want to be under an obligation to anybody, one would refuse to be helped straight off, without thinking about responsibility, or anything else; and once done, it couldn't be undone!"

"Exactly. In such cases it is merely a yielding to impulse, and has nothing to do with heroism. If the chance of an opening

in life is rejected reluctantly and for good reasons, then whoever does it is perhaps a true hero, and, we will hope, always reaps the reward of his sacrifice to duty later in life. But if it is only done from a false spirit of independence—from temper in fact—he himself in after life would probably be the first to tell you that he had been a young fool, and had never ceased to regret it.”

“I shall believe that Stephen Powys had good reasons, until I know the contrary,” said Frank.

“It is very possible. I know nothing of the circumstances in detail. And, anyhow, one might well make allowances for much graver faults of judgment in a youth of two or three and twenty under the influence of the shock of such a sudden shattering of every prospect in life.”

“Yes, indeed!” exclaimed his wife. “My dear Nigel, a boy of two-and-twenty war-

ranted free from all errors of judgment would be the most insufferable prig conceivable ; and you, of all people, would wish to knock him down immediately !”

“ He would be all the better for it, I dare say,” quietly answered her husband, moving, as he spoke, to make way for Mrs. L’Estrange, who was beginning to think that Frank would be tired, and that it would be wise to go.

“ Then you’ll come over to Throstlethwaite soon, Agatha, and bring all the children to see us ?” said Frank to Mrs. Kennedy, as they were driving off. “ And *you’ll* come, too—will you not ?” he added, looking at her husband.

“ Yes, certainly. I shall be very glad to come,” was the reply.

The Monksholme party saunteréd slowly up the path through the fields towards the house.

“ What a grievous pity !” said Agatha.

"Poor Frank! Such a fine boy as he was, too, and with such a splendid prospect!"

"It is a bad business," said Mr. Charteris, sadly.

"But how very odd to have kept him here all the winter," said Agatha. "Not even to have tried a foreign climate!—Not that it would really have done any good, I suppose?"

"There has never been a time when it would have been even possible to have tried it," said her mother; "or you may be sure it would have been done. He was perfectly well all the summer and autumn. He left Eton in July, and was to go to Oxford after Christmas, reading meanwhile at home with a tutor. He got wet through and thoroughly chilled on one of the first days of November, when he was staying with the Allonbys, neglected to take any precautions, and came home a day or two afterwards with a bad

feverish cold. They had been shooting in low marshy ground, and he had caught fever as well as cold, I believe ; anyhow, poor boy, he was dangerously ill for weeks with inflammation of the lungs, and every kind of complication. He never left his bed till after Christmas, and to have moved him would have been impossible. Since that, he has rallied a little, as you see ; but no change could be of any use, and a journey might kill him at once. There is serious heart-disease, and it is only a question of time. It may end at any time, or he may linger for a few weeks, or even months."

"It is terrible for his mother," said Agatha. Then in a moment she added, lightly, "Well, proverbs may be vulgar, but how true they often are ! It *is* an ill wind that blows nobody good. For I suppose in this case there is no doubt that Leonard will just take Frank's place at Throsthwaite. What a

change for him, after having next to nothing, to become the heir to such a property as that is now! Of course, it is a dreadful thing for Mrs. L'Estrange; but as far as the outer world is concerned, I dare say Leonard will do just as well as Frank—and, of course, he will take the name?"

"Everything will be entirely in Mrs. L'Estrange's power," said Mr. Charteris, stopping for a moment as he walked in front with his son-in-law; "and I do not suppose she has yet given a thought to the future."

His tone implied that speculation about it was premature, and distasteful to him.

Ruth turned abruptly away, unable to endure the discussion, and proposed to her little niece, who had already made friends with her, to run on and join the group of babies, nurses and perambulators which was visible near the house.

"We say as little about it all as possible, my

dear," said Mrs. Charteris, falling a little way behind the gentlemen with Agatha, and speaking in a low, confidential tone.

"Ah! I thought that wasn't an unlikely complication!" said Agatha, with ready comprehension of her mother's glance at Ruth as she ran on with little Ethel.

"It has been a great anxiety to me ever since he came back last summer," said Mrs. Charteris.

"I don't wonder, mamma. But in that case, all this really must be a great relief to you. I should not fancy Ruth would be very easy to guide in such matters—romantic, isn't she, and rather wilful? But, of course, Leonard, *with Throstlethwaite*, is all that could be wished?"

"Yes, exactly. But, Agatha, my dear, your father would not like anything of the kind to be said, I am sure——"

Agatha laughed.

"Oh, of course not! Nor would Nigel. Men like the privilege of being blind as long as there is any awkwardness. I quite understand."

Agatha Kennedy was herself perfectly happy and prosperous, and other people's troubles sat very lightly on her spirits. She was never considered hard or cold, for she had always ready sympathy to bestow—a feeling not too deep or strong to be easily and gracefully expressed, and which passed as quickly as it came, leaving no trace; but though it was momentary, it was genuine, and therefore produced the desired impression. She was worldly, but she was rarely called so, because her natural good taste prevented her from expressing her views on unsuitable occasions, while, even to congenial hearers, they were skilfully shrouded in playful nonsense. She was wilful, but she did not appear to be so; for she had the art of

apparently submitting to others with the most graceful sweetness, while in reality managing to do exactly as she chose.

Her marriage had not been a worldly one, inasmuch as it was perfectly well known that she had refused one offer, at least, which would have given her both wealth and rank. But, though she would never have married a man she did *not* like for the sake of his position, Agatha Charteris would certainly never have dreamed of allowing herself to fall in love imprudently.

She was two-and-twenty when she met Nigel Kennedy, and he was twelve years older—a difference which she rather liked. His connections were extremely good. He was an eldest son, with large estates in Scotland entailed upon him, and though his father had married a second time, and, oppressed by the necessity of providing for a large family, was not inclined to be liberal,

Agatha's judgment was quite satisfied with the prospect he had to offer. They would not be rich at first, but neither would they be poor ; and Captain Kennedy was certain to get on, for he was clever, and he had interest. She really liked him ; she was proud of him, and flattered by his affection for herself, and she rather enjoyed the thoughts of a little variety of life before settling down at the family place in Scotland. That variety came in a pleasant form.

When first they married, Captain Kennedy's regiment was at Malta ; but in a few months he obtained a good staff appointment under an uncle who was made governor of one of our most important colonies. This uncle, being unmarried, much attached to his nephew, and much charmed with that nephew's wife, wished them to live with him ; and thus it had fallen to Agatha to do the honours of Government House, and to enjoy all the

privileges of Vice-Queenship, except the formal dignities and duties, which would have been only a restraint and a burden.

She acquitted herself well. Her manners were perfect ; her dress was always beyond criticism, and yet never extravagant ; she had perfect health and spirits ; her children were thoroughly well-cared for, but never allowed to be obtrusive ; and while she contrived always to select her intimates from "the best people," she managed to avoid any appearance of neglecting the more insignificant.

Prosperous, successful, and brilliant in society, while yet really attached to her husband and children, Agatha was thoroughly happy and satisfied, and it had never even crossed her mind that there was any flaw in the perfection of her married life. Nigel was kind and affectionate, he admired her and was amused by her, and it had never

occurred to her that she was not all he had intended her to be.

Sir Everard Kennedy's term of government being now over, the Nigel Kennedys had returned to England to await some other appointment, and, meanwhile, to visit the relations whom they had not seen since their marriage, six years before.

CHAPTER VII.

THE moon in this particular instance justified Daniel's faith in "her quarters." The fine weather continued unbroken for some time, and "Mr. Campbell's new-fangled nonsense" was considered to have been triumphantly refuted.

A fortnight passed quickly, with frequent meetings between Monksholme and Throstlethwaite.

Frank continued in much the same state, and was able to enjoy the variety which the arrival of the Kennedys occasioned. Agatha amused him, and he liked to watch the chil-

dren at play, and to make friends with them ; but his great pleasure was in getting Ruth and Colonel Kennedy over to Throstlethwaite without any of the others, and listening to them as they talked with his mother.

Colonel Kennedy was much too kind not to have complied with Frank's wish to see him, even had he found it tiresome to go ; but in fact it was as pleasant a way of spending an afternoon as he could desire. A ride or a row down to Throstlethwaite with Ruth, and an hour or two spent there with Mrs. L'Estrange and Frank, could certainly not be looked upon as any sacrifice, even though it happened two or three times a week.

The plan for sending Leonard in search of Stephen Powys had been carried out. Mrs. L'Estrange had arranged with Mr. Nichols that he should have a few days' leave, and he had gone up to London in the middle of that

same week. He wrote in a day or two to say that he had been to Mr. Hillyer's chambers, but that he was out of town for a few days. The clerk could give no information about Mr. Powys, and he was therefore waiting until Mr. Hillyer should return.

Another letter followed in about a week, which effectually put an end to all idea of the success of Frank's scheme. Leonard wrote that he had seen Mr. Hillyer, who, however, had not heard from Mr. Powys for a considerable time, and, though he knew that he had left Devonshire, could not give his present address. When last he had heard from him, he was in treaty for some employment in America. Leonard added that, under these circumstances, he was returning at once to Edenford, as further inquiries would be useless. He would come over to Throstlethwaite as usual on Saturday afternoon.

On Saturday, exactly a fortnight after the

day on which Ruth had rowed down to Throstlethwaite for the first time that summer and on which the Kennedys had arrived at Monksholme, she set out for a long ride with her brother-in-law, who was now her usual companion.

On this particular afternoon they had arranged to ride entirely round the lake of Brideswater, going first to Thornbeck (for there was no road across the valley near the head of the lake), and so round by Carlsgill and Otter's Bridge to Throstlethwaite, where they would stop for afternoon tea, and come home at their leisure afterwards. It was a long ride, altogether about twenty miles, but Ruth thought nothing of it, and it was a delicious afternoon, so they set off soon after two, intending to reach Throstlethwaite, (where, however, they were not expected) a little before five.

When they passed the "Otter" inn about

half-past four, they found things there in the usual Saturday afternoon confusion. Several unguarded carts were standing at the door, waiting while their owners refreshed themselves within ; and it seemed probable (if the condition of one farmer who was just starting again might be taken as a sample of what that of the others was likely to be) that a safe return home would in most cases be due to the instinctive discretion of the horses, rather than to that of their masters.

“ I have a message to give here,” said Ruth. “ You won’t mind stopping for a moment, Nigel ?”

Of course Colonel Kennedy did not mind, and Ruth, steering Zoe daintily through the carts, rode up to the door which was standing wide open, and rattled upon it with the handle of her whip. A good-looking landlady made her appearance and after an interchange of friendly greetings Ruth said :

“ I only called, Mrs. Dobson, to ask you about Polly Nixon. You said, the other day, that you thought she would be better away from the inn, and that you would like to get her a place where she would be well looked after. My sister, Mrs. Kennedy, wants an under nurse. The upper one is a steady, sensible woman and an excellent servant. Would Polly suit, do you think ?”

Mrs. Dobson had listened to all Ruth had to say in silence, but with a rising colour ; and she now broke forth into a torrent of excited words, from which Ruth gathered by degrees that Polly (an orphan niece of Isaac Dobson’s, whom he and his wife had brought up, having no children of their own) was no longer at the inn ; that she and her aunt had had a great many “ words ” lately about her idle, careless ways and forward flirting with all the men about the place. There had been “ a deal of unpleasantness,” reaching

a climax the day before, àpropos of a young man who had been staying at the inn for a few days fishing, and had amused himself by making love to Polly, who was certainly pretty enough to make his doing so quite comprehensible.

There had been a violent scene the previous evening between Polly and the Dobsons, and the result of it was that the next morning she went off with this gentleman, leaving a rude, saucy note for her aunt, saying that she "would never darken their doors again, and that Mr. Trevor was going to take her to London and make a lady of her."

"A nice sort of a lady she'll be!" concluded the angry aunt. "She'll just go from bad to worse and no help for it. I'm sorry, too, for she wasn't a bad hearted lass if she hadn't been that eat up with vanity and nonsense, that she was past bearing. She's

done for herself now, any way, and many's the time she'll rue, poor silly lass !"

"I am very, very sorry to hear it," said Ruth, "and I am afraid, indeed, there is no good ending to be hoped for. Poor Polly! She was so pretty and bright."

"Ay. She was good enough to look at, and that's all the men thinks of—she could do as she pleased with any of them and it fairly turned her head. There's Joe Fisher, poor lad, nearly out of his senses with hearing she's gone off. I knew he'd take it to heart, for he's been clean daft about her for ever so long, and though she'd no call to go flighiting on with all the men about the place when she'd promised *him*, he'd never hear a word agen' her. I thought to go over to Throstlethwaite to-night and get him told quietly, but I couldn't leave the inn of a Saturday afore dark, with all the market folk astir—and he came in, a quarter of an

hour back, just crazed. He'd met Tim Fletcher and heard about it, and came tearing on here to know if it was true."

"Poor Joe!" said Ruth compassionately.

"I'm sorry for him, too, poor silly lad," said Mrs. Dobson. "Not but what he's well rid' of her, if he'd only see it! However he wouldn't own to believing it anyway, and held to it that it was all her nonsense after we'd been hard on her, and that she'd likely just gone over the hill to her aunt's in Lingdale, to give us a fright for a bit; and then he went right off like mad up the wood, Lingdale way, to go and find out."

Calls from within the inn for Mrs. Dobson were becoming impatient, and after a few more words on either side she returned to her duties, and Ruth and Colonel Kennedy rode slowly on. In former days Mrs. Dobson had been housekeeper at Monksholme, and since her marriage to the landlord of the

"Otter" much friendly communication had been kept up, so that Ruth had known Polly Nixon ever since the Dobsons had adopted her when she was ten years old, now nine years ago.

"That seems a baddish business," said Colonel Kennedy. "Between the niece's vanity and the aunt's temper they have made a mess of it."

"Mrs. Dobson has a temper, and what they call 'a rough tongue,'" replied Ruth; "but she is a good, kind woman, and meant well by Polly, though her management might not be very judicious. She has been anxious about her for some time, and thought the inn a bad place for her, and wished to send her to service."

"I should think our nursery was as well without the young lady," said Colonel Kennedy. "She would have been in her glory in a garrison town."

Ruth laughed ; but she answered seriously "I had not thought of that. But I am really very sorry for poor Joe. He is the groom at Throstlethwaite, you know—old Daniel's son—and he was desperately in love with this girl. I am afraid it will altogether upset him, poor fellow ; for though he is an excellent servant, he is 'just a bit soft,' as they say."

She stopped suddenly, for at a turn in the road, about a couple of hundred yards from the inn, they came upon a low basket carriage, drawn by a handsome bay pony. It was standing quite still at one side of the road, close under the bank. Ruth checked Zoe instantly in surprise and dismay, for Frank L'Estrange was alone in the carriage, leaning back among his cushions, with the reins in his hands. Ruth knew that during the last few days of fine weather, when it had been safe for him to venture beyond the

grounds, he had used this pony-carriage instead of his garden-chair, but she was utterly astonished to find him here quite alone.

"You here, Frank!" she exclaimed. "And quite by yourself! How very imprudent! Where is Daniel?"

"It's all right!" replied Frank, coolly. "Have you been round the lake?"

"Yes; and we were coming to Throstlethwaite to beg for some tea."

"You're a couple of bricks!" was Frank's answer. "Mother isn't at home to-day. She went to Edenford this morning about some business; and she and Leonard are coming back together by the later train—Thornbeck way you know—it isn't due here till near seven; but you'll come all the same, and have tea with me now?"

"Yes; of course," said Ruth; "but where is Daniel, Frank? You ought not to be here alone."

“Don’t fuss about nothing, Ruth! There’s no need; I’m all right. Daniel’s safe at home with a gouty hand, poor old boy, and Joe is out with me. We weren’t coming this way; but we met Tim Fletcher on the bridge, and he was—‘well, not to say droonk,’” said the boy, in admirable dialect, “but pretty well on the way to it. He blurted out a story of Polly Nixon’s having gone off with some gentleman. It’s all bosh, no doubt; but Joe was in such a taking, I really couldn’t help driving this way, and sending him to find out about it; only as I didn’t fancy standing in front of the ‘Otter,’ I stopped here to wait for him.”

“You ought both to have had more sense,” said Ruth, indignantly. “Joe should never have left you. You know if anything started that pony, you couldn’t hold him; and even if you could, nothing could be worse for you than such an exertion.”

“Fritz isn’t thinking of starting,” responded Frank. “He is nearly as sleepy as I was till you came, with the delicious smell of this bank of whins. Joe is sure to be back in a minute.”

Colonel Kennedy during this discussion had quietly dismounted, and was standing at Fritz’s head, holding his own horse also.

Ruth briefly repeated Mrs. Dobson’s story, including the fact of Joe’s sudden start for Lingdale, forgetting that his master was waiting for him.

“Poor Joe!” said Frank. “I’m sure he may be excused for forgetting me for a while.”

“Perhaps,” answered Ruth. “But the question is, what must be done now? We cannot guess how long it may be before Joe comes to his senses, and we cannot leave you here alone on the road when every other cart that passes goes zigzagging all over the

place! Nigel, if you don't mind leading Zoe on to Throstlethwaite for me, I'll drive this boy home."

"The best plan," said Colonel Kennedy; and he moved a few steps away from the carriage to hold Zoe's head while Ruth dismounted. The plan might be a good one, but it was not destined to be carried out yet awhile; for almost as Colonel Kennedy spoke, the noise of an approaching train reached them. The railroad was not in sight, but it was very near them; and as long as that peculiar sound was audible, Zoe chose to plunge and caper, so that it was quite impossible for Ruth to get off. She sat there half-laughing.

"Was there ever such a silly creature?" she said with some impatience. "She isn't a bit frightened—it is pure affectation; but as long as she hears a train she considers herself entitled to dance!"

Colonel Kennedy's own horse, though not emulating Zoe, was sufficiently restless to make him feel it wiser to keep a little away from the carriage, and he did so the less reluctantly that Fritz stood calmly surveying the antics of the other horses without any apparent wish to imitate them.

Tranquillity being restored, Ruth jumped off. She was holding Zoe for the moment required by Colonel Kennedy to mount his own horse again before he took her rein, when unfortunately a man passed driving some pigs. Half an idiot at his best, he was now a good deal the worse for drink, and as he passed he hit out idly with the long whip he carried, and struck Fritz sharply. With an indignant toss of his head the pony started off at a quick trot, and was out of reach before either Ruth or Colonel Kennedy could catch the reins.

Both were in their saddles again, they

hardly knew how, and in a moment were following the carriage, though cautiously, for fear of making matters worse. Frank, quite as aware as Ruth could be, that Fritz must be stopped, if possible, before his own excitement increased his pace so as to be quite beyond control, sat up and did his best with both wrist and voice. He succeeded beyond their expectations, and before they reached the turn on to Otter's Bridge, the carriage was again standing still.

All danger of accident was over, but Ruth had other and worse fears. She sprang off her horse and flung the reins to Colonel Kennedy, saying,—

“You must manage them all three, Nigel;” and the next moment was by Frank's side in the carriage.

He greeted her with a triumphant smile, but almost instantly the flush on his face changed to a deadly pallor, and the attack of

violent pain and breathlessness which Ruth had dreaded came upon him. The unusual exertion and excitement had quickened the circulation beyond what the weakened and diseased heart could bear.

Ruth had fortunately more than once been present during similar though less severe attacks ; she knew what to do, and she did it promptly, though with an agony of dread, which almost paralyzed her, lest he should die there on the road, when his mother was far away. She knew that he was never allowed to go out in his chair without the necessary remedies being taken with him. Of course, therefore, the case containing them was certain to be in the carriage. She soon found it, and all that the tenderest care could do she did for Frank.

To get help was impossible, for Colonel Kennedy, with two horses to hold and the pony to keep still, had enough to do.

At length the pain subsided, the gasping breath came more naturally, and Frank, though terribly exhausted, was safe again—for the time. He tried to speak some word of thanks to Ruth, but she laid her finger on his lips instantly.

“Not a syllable, Frank! Keep perfectly still. I’ll drive on now, Nigel. We shall be at the house in a few minutes. Keep close to us,” she added meaningly.

Colonel Kennedy understood her. She could not be confident that there would be no return of pain, and he must be at hand. They reached Throstlethwaite, however, quickly and safely, and were immediately surrounded by a group of astonished, frightened servants. Colonel Kennedy’s imperative sign for silence and prompt unquestioning obedience was not resisted.

Frank was carried at once to his couch in the drawing-room, and carefully settled there

by the butler, who always waited upon him.

Ruth remained with him, thankful beyond the power of words to see him lying there, white and exhausted it might be, but evidently better and more comfortable with each succeeding minute. Even when Colonel Kennedy came in, and Palmer brought the tea, and all was apparently much as usual again, Ruth insisted on Frank's keeping perfectly quiet.

It was getting late : the drawing-room clock had chimed six, and Ruth moved to the most distant window with a glance at Colonel Kennedy to follow her.

"I can't leave him, Nigel, till Mrs. L'Estrange is here."

"Certainly not," was the ready reply ; "and I shall not leave you alone here. I have already sent a messenger to Monksholme, with a note explaining how things stand.

We can ride home by moonlight, after dinner, quite well."

Ruth nodded gratefully. She appreciated his quiet, prompt decision.

"Hatching treason, Ruth?" said Frank, as she returned to him.

"No. Only an invitation to dinner," she replied with a smile. "We are not going to trust you to your own foolish devices again, and mean to stay and see you safe into your mother's charge, and ride home in the evening."

Frank smiled, well pleased; then the next moment he exclaimed,—

"How about meeting mother at the station? Daniel can't drive; and even if Joe should have come home by that time, he wouldn't be fit to drive the carriage."

He pulled the cord attached to the bell, which was always placed within his reach, as he spoke.

Palmer came instantly.

"Has Joe come back yet?" Frank said.

"No, sir;" and Palmer's tone and manner implied that no pleasant welcome would await Joe when he did return.

"Then who is going to the station?"

"Well, sir, there isn't nobody to drive the carriage; but we thought if one of the men took the pony over in the basket-cart, that Mr. Leonard could drive missis home, and she wouldn't mind, seeing how things is with us."

"No. That would do. Only [whoever goes will frighten her so by telling her a lot of rubbish. You had better go yourself, Palmer. You've more sense than the rest, and would stick to facts."

The compliment was gratifying; but Palmer looked at Ruth, and, encouraged by her evidently agreeing with him, boldly refused.

"I would go, sir, in a minute; but missis

would never forgive me for leaving the house when you were ill. I really couldn't do it."

"Quite right, Palmer," said Colonel Kennedy. "Look here, Frank! Don't fidget, and I'll go over for your mother myself. The sight of me won't frighten her, and I will promise you to tell her [only the most prosy facts possible."

This settled the difficulty; but Frank had still something to say.

"I want to speak to Daniel, Palmer—*now*—and come back with him."

"Oh, Frank! *Do* keep quiet!" said Ruth.

"You didn't ought to talk, sir," said Palmer.

But Frank insisted.

Colonel Kennedy said, quickly, "Let him have his own way," and Palmer obeyed.

"You are quite right, my boy," said Colonel Kennedy, going up to the couch.

"But very few words will say what, if I guess right, you want said; and for your mother's sake do all you can to avoid a fresh attack before she comes home. You are not out of the wood yet."

Palmer now came back with Daniel.

Frank felt the force of what Colonel Kennedy had said; for he was evidently already tired, and spoke rather brokenly and feebly.

"I shan't be any worse after a bit, Daniel," he said, holding out a hand to the old man. "I sent for you to say that I won't have Joe row'd for leaving me. I sent him myself. What he heard was enough to put him off his head, and make him forget me; and even if it does make me ill again, I won't have him blamed. If you're hard on him, Daniel, he'll be going to the bad—anyway, I won't have it! When he comes back, I'll see him, please. And Palmer, you just make them all understand that if ever I hear of anybody

saying a word to Joe about it, whoever it is will go."

Palmer, with due gravity, answered,—

"Very good, sir. I'll see to it."

And then he hurried Daniel (to whom calm speech would have been impossible) out of the room.

Colonel Kennedy followed, for it was nearly time to go to the station, and Ruth and Frank were left alone together.

CHAPTER VIII.

DESIRING Frank to try to sleep, Ruth took up a book, and seated herself by one of the windows. Frank, however, lay in perfect silence with his eyes closed, so that she need not even pretend to read in order to keep him quiet ; and her book soon lay forgotten on her lap, while sad thoughts followed each other quickly through her mind.

It was only two days since Dr. Jervis of Edenford had told her father that, "With good luck, young L'Estrange might live several months yet, and with quite as much enjoyment of life as he was capable of at

present. The disease seemed to have paused, and he was so admirably cared for, that very likely he might see the summer through." Ruth had heard this, and had rejoiced in it and believed it, for it was a long time since he had had any bad attack, and he was indeed so carefully watched and guarded that it seemed scarcely possible for any disturbing element to enter his life.

Yet now, in a moment, all was undone. The tender care, the minute precautions of his mother's watchful love, had all been unavailing to shield him from accident. A thoughtless girl's heartless, wicked folly—a weak man's want of self-control and courage—an irresponsible idiot's crazy act in the mere instinct of purposeless mischief—and the chain was complete. Would Polly Nixon ever know all the consequences of her unprincipled flight? If she did, would she care? Somehow, Ruth could not help fear-

ing the worst from this attack. She knew that even a slight one was extremely bad for him ; this had been very severe, and she could see that it had taken great hold of him. It was not unlikely to return ; and if it did, there could be little hope, she fancied. She listened with feverish impatience for the sound of the train passing on the other side of the lake, and bringing back his mother. She had gone to Edenford on important business ; but it was the first time she had left him since his illness, and Ruth shrank with horror from the thought of the shock that might have been awaiting her on her return, had not she herself and Colonel Kennedy chanced to be in the way just at the moment of danger.

There was something inexpressibly painful to Ruth, too, in Frank himself being the only person to be ignorant of the truth as to his state. *She* was longing passionately for

his mother's arrival, in dread with every passing minute lest the pain should return, and his strength prove unequal to the struggle it must cause, while *he* had summed up his view of his own condition in a few half-laughing words to her as she had settled his pillows when Colonel Kennedy left them.

"What a lot of bother I give you all by being so slow in getting strong! It makes one feel such a fool to go on like this just with stopping a bit of a pony! It's rather jolly too, though, to be taken such care of, and I'll pay you with interest, some day, Ruth!"

Clearly he understood nothing of the silent anguish which had torn his mother's heart for so long. He thought himself merely "slow in getting strong," when any moment might be the last! What good could it have done to tell him the truth—gentle, thoughtful,

and pure minded as he was? It was a question not easily answered.

The inevitable shock and agitation of such a disclosure, however tenderly made, must have been a risk—might even have shortened the time of which every day and hour was so precious to his mother—and the open acknowledgment that the moment of parting was so near, must for her have added much to the difficulty of calm endurance. All true—and yet Ruth felt that there was something almost treacherous and dishonourable in every one but himself knowing what so nearly concerned him.

The silence had lasted for nearly half an hour when suddenly Frank spoke. "Ruth! come here!"

She was by his side in a moment.

"You are not ill again—are you?"

"No. But that was a nasty half hour by the bridge there, Ruth, and takes a good bit

of getting over. I feel rather as if it might come back, too, and that would be a bad look out. If I am in for being really ill again as I was last autumn, it would be no joke, you know. Old Jervis and that London swell mother had down, pulled awfully long faces over me I know. I don't think at one time they expected me to get over it, but I did ; and lately, I've been getting strong quite fast. I meant to ride again next week. But if this makes me ill again, I don't know what might come of it. I'm not so strong yet as I was before I was ill by a good bit, and I mightn't pull through a second time, you see. If I didn't—it would be awfully hard lines for mother——?”

There was something of interrogation in his tone. A faint suspicion of the truth had dawned upon him at last. Ruth could not answer. She dared not tell him how it really was with him—even if the words

would have come to her—but she could not—she would not attempt to deceive him. She stooped over him and put his hair back from his forehead, like the gentle, tender elder sister, she had always been to him.

“It is hard for her and for us all to see you suffer, Frank, though you are so good and patient.”

Perhaps nothing could have broken the truth to him more effectually than her inability to answer his question. He caught both her hands before she could move away, and said, for him, rather sharply. “Ruth! Look at me!”

She obeyed, and though conscious that large tears were slowly rising to her eyes she met his steadily.

The next moment he dropped her hands and lay back upon his pillows again. She saw that he understood, though he said nothing; and she moved away from him and

stood by the fire, conscious chiefly of a horrible dread of the immediate physical effect of such a sudden perception of the truth. He was however perfectly quiet, and in a few minutes more Mrs. L'Estrange came in with Colonel Kennedy and Leonard.

Frank greeted his mother merrily, but he did not attempt to speak much, and made no protest when she said that he must not think of coming in to dinner, but must have what he wanted quietly in the drawing-room, and rest until they all joined him afterwards.

Then she carried Ruth off upstairs to make such preparation for dinner as was in her power; and, as Leonard and Colonel Kennedy also went away for the same purpose, Frank was left alone.

When the two ladies joined him again after dinner, which they did as soon as it was possible, they found him apparently comfortable and very cheerful, ready to ask

questions about his mother's day at Edensor. She had gone there chiefly to see the Bishop of the Diocese, for she wished to build and endow a church and school at Kester's Hill where her ironworks were. Both were greatly needed for the increased population of the roughest kind, and the scheme had been for many months under consideration, but some technical difficulties had arisen and Mrs. L'Estrange had at length found it necessary to go and talk the matter over with the Bishop, and Frank was interested in hearing how she had prospered.

Colonel Kennedy and Leonard came in before she had quite finished telling him all she had done.

"Well!" said Frank, soon afterwards. "I wish you could have had Stephen Powys to help you through it all, mother! It is a great deal for you to have to manage for

yourself. And so you really could hear nothing of him, Leonard?"

"Only what I wrote to Aunt Margaret," replied Leonard. "From what Mr. Hillyer said, I daresay he would have turned out the right man if there had been a reasonable chance of finding him; but America was rather too vague."

"Well—yes—rather!" replied Frank laughing. "But I'm sorry. He would have helped you so capitally, mother, and would have seen things the right way up and understood what you wished. He would have gone in for the sense of responsibility line about property I know, and not have thought, like poor old Bailey, that saving your money was always the greatest duty in life! However it can't be helped."

"No, indeed," said Mrs. L'Estrange. "And I have heard to-day of a gentleman who seems promising. He is rather young,

but well recommended, and Leonard knows him and thinks him quite likely to be the sort of man we want."

"Wodehouse was at Oxford with me," said Leonard, in answer to Frank's questioning glance. "He is a good fellow and clever, and has been training for land agent work. You thought his references satisfactory, Aunt Margaret, did you not? If the business part of the affair is all right, I am sure you will like him personally."

"I shall write to ask him to come down here to see me before I inquire further," said Mrs. L'Estrange; "but I think he seems promising."

The entrance of the servants with coffee now stopped the discussion, and Palmer created a diversion by announcing that Isaac Dobson had come over from the "Otter," bringing Joe Fisher home.

Joe had gone quite over into Lingdale,

before he remembered in how helpless and dangerous a position he had left his master. He had returned at once in great alarm, to look for him, but it was then seven o'clock, and, of course, he had found no trace of the carriage where he had left it. Too much frightened to go home, he had gone to the "Otter" to see if anything was known about it there. He had there heard what had happened—told in the blunt, rough country fashion, which makes no allowance for weak natures, and with considerable exaggeration of Frank's present condition. Distress, self-reproach and fear combined, were too much for him—he was quite "off his head," Isaac Dobson reported—and he had been obliged to come himself to get him back to Throstlethwaite at all. As it was, he was in far too great a state of excitement and exhaustion to be in the least fit to come in to speak to Frank, as he had desired.

"Poor Joe!" was Frank's comment after all this had been extracted from Palmer. "Well! I'll see him to-morrow morning—tell him so—or, stay—Leonard, I wish *you* would go out and speak to him, and tell him I'm all right again now, and that we'll have another drive to-morrow, if it's fine. I know he's sure to be awfully cut up at having left me, and he has enough to bear without that."

Leonard rose readily to comply.

"I'll see him, and make his mind easy; but you're a great deal too good-natured, Frank."

The moon did not rise till after nine, and it was half-past before Ruth and Colonel Kennedy left Throstlethwaite. Frank had waited till they were gone, before being taken to his room; and, while his mother was saying a few last words to Colonel Kennedy in the hall, he called Ruth

back after she had said "Good-night" to him.

Drawing her down towards him as he lay on his sofa, he said almost in a whisper—

"Ruth! You'll be good to mother! She'll have only you—and you won't let Leonard worry her. He doesn't mean it, but he does sometimes—and you'll make it right, and help her——"

A multitude of conflicting emotions made it almost impossible for Ruth to speak. She stooped and softly kissed his forehead, as she answered—

"I will do all I can ;" and then she hurried to join the others in the hall, conscious only that she must not let her self-command fail her.

The hall door was open, the horses were pawing the gravel outside in the moonlight, servants were waiting about ; Colonel Kennedy was just going out, and Mrs. L'Es-

trange was standing alone in the lighted hall.

Ruth never afterwards forgot a single detail of the scene. One glance at Mrs. L'Estrange's face, now that she was no longer in Frank's presence, showed that she had seen and understood how much he was changed since the morning, and Ruth felt herself strangely shaken by the perception of the depth of suffering that was so resolutely controlled. No words but those of the commonest leave-taking passed between them, and then Ruth found herself standing by Zoe's side.

Leonard was waiting to help her to mount. She had thought him looking ill all the evening, and now as the moonlight fell on his face, his paleness almost frightened her. Colonel Kennedy was, however, already beginning to move on and there was no time to ask questions—she felt indeed that none were

needed, for in spite of all previous warnings, Frank's present state seemed to have been produced by some sudden and horrible accident, and Leonard could not but feel the shock more deeply than any one but his aunt. With a silent gesture of farewell she turned Zoe from the door, and rode up to Colonel Kennedy's side. Neither of them spoke until they had reached the Lodge, and passed through the heavy iron gates. The sound of these being closed behind them broke the spell. Ruth shivered, as if the noise jarred every nerve.

"That poor mother! God help her!" said Colonel Kennedy, almost involuntarily; but Ruth did not answer, and they rode home slowly, in unbroken silence. He was surprised, for he was not accustomed to women whose emotions deprived them of all inclination for speech, but he was beginning to understand his sister-in-law; his

quick observation had led him to perceive to a great extent the real position of all the actors in this drama towards each other, and his strongest feeling in the matter was one of anxiety for her.

The night was fine. There were heavy masses of white clouds here and there in the sky, sweeping rapidly before a fresh breeze, and breaking occasionally into thin drifts of vapour. The moon was sometimes shining brightly down from an open space of clear sky, lighting up the lake with large patches of glittering silver broken by deep shadows ; sometimes it was entirely hidden behind the clouds, showing its position only by the brilliant fringe of light edging the masses ; then again it emerged, half veiled by the floating vapour and throwing a faint mysterious light on everything. The changes were rapid and constant—beautiful, but bewildering to watch, and Ruth felt as if her thoughts were drift-

ing as helplessly before some irresistible power, as the clouds and vapour which she was seeing thus driven before the wind. She was fully convinced that she should not see Frank again. It was the first time she had ever been brought into close personal contact with death, and for the moment it awed her almost beyond grief.

But she could not think—she could only let ideas pass through her mind as they would—and the aching sorrow for his mother's suffering which filled her heart for one moment, gave place the next to a speculation as to the full meaning of those last words Frank had spoken to her. He had, then, guessed how it was with her and Leonard, for he had implied a certainty that Leonard would succeed to his place at Throstlethwaite, and he had assumed that that involved her being there too. This dying request to her made her feel as if

Throstlethwaite would be a legacy from Frank—the idea of succeeding him there ceased to be intolerable—and she knew that she, more than any one, could help to lighten the weight of sorrow which Mrs. L'Estrange must henceforward bear. Then again the pity of it all overpowered every other thought, and dreams of future happiness for herself seemed a mockery, in the face of a grief so deep.

On reaching Monksholme, they rode at once into the stable-yard, and then entered the house by a side door among the offices. A minute later, Ruth pushed open a swing-door which led into the other part of the house, but she paused there with a sudden shrinking from going on. The house was shut up—the passage was lighted—in the drawing-room Agatha was singing, and her song was a lively coquettish French *chanson*. The contrast was too sudden.

Ruth felt stifled and oppressed, and as if it were impossible to go forward and face all the questions which she would be expected to answer.

"Don't try it!" said her brother-in-law, kindly. "You must be quite worn out. I will say that you are tired and have gone to your room."

It was a new sensation to Ruth to feel herself at once understood and quietly cared for.

"Thank you. I think I will escape," she said gratefully, and went upstairs at once.

Early the next morning a messenger from Throstlethwaite brought two notes to Monks-holme. One was from Leonard Barrington to Mr. Charteris, telling him that Frank had died in the night, suddenly and quietly, without further illness. He added, that Mrs. L'Estrange was well, and was bearing it so far with marvellous composure.

The other note was from Mrs. L'Estrange to Ruth, and was very short :—

“ My darling can suffer no more now—and for that I can be thankful. Soon I will ask you to come to me—meanwhile pray for me, that I may bear to live.—M. L'E.”

CHAPTER IX.

IF Mrs. L'Estrange could have thought it right to do merely what she liked, she would certainly have asked to have Ruth Charteris with her during the first days after Frank's death ; but she was not one of the people whom sorrow deprives either of their power of judgment or of their sense of duty towards others. She felt that she should not be justified, under the circumstances, in having Ruth and Leonard at Throstlethwaite together, unless she were prepared at once to sanction an engagement between them, and make their marriage possible.

This was a point not to be hastily decided; and, as Leonard's remaining with her for a time was of course inevitable, she must do without the comfort of Ruth's companionship.

Leonard showed himself at his best during that week. He did all that it was in his power to do for his aunt quietly and well. He wrote letters and answered inquiries; he saved her as much as possible from the consideration of painful details, and showed, throughout, both kindness and tact. There was a good deal of genuine feeling in it, for he had been really fond of Frank in his own way, he was heartily sorry for his aunt's suffering, and he was too impressionable not to be affected by the sadness of it all; but at the same time there was an ever-present thought of himself, and an intense anxiety to have some assurance that his own hopes for the future were not to be disappointed. He

scarcely thought it possible that his aunt could contemplate any other arrangement than that of giving him at once the position of an adopted son, of her recognized heir, but he longed to *know* that it was to be so.

Frank's death took place on Saturday night; the simple, quiet funeral was on the following Thursday; and in the meantime there was no communication between Monks-holme and Throstlethwaite, except by letter. Neither was there on Friday and Saturday.

On Sunday, Leonard appeared alone at church. He spoke of his aunt very feelingly, and said, that, though she was perfectly well, and bore everything with wonderful calmness and courage, he could not help dreading some great reaction when the first conscious necessity for exertion was over and she would have only to realize the blank left by her loss, and to face the dreary monotony of

daily life alone. He added that he did not at all like leaving her, as he must do the next day, for the whole of the week.

"Surely you do not think of leaving her to go to the bank?" said Mrs. Charteris. "What can your work there matter, in comparison with your remaining with her?"

There was a shade of constraint in Leonard's tone as he answered—

"It would matter nothing, of course, if she wished me to stay with her. She would only have to say so. But she has not hinted any such desire—and I cannot suggest it. She knows perfectly well that I must wish to be with her and do what I can for her, but her theory of life is stoical, both for herself and other people. My work is at Edenford—there is no real need for my staying away any longer, —therefore, of course, I must go back, however lonely it may leave her. That is her view, I have no doubt." Then turning to

Mr. Charteris, he said : " She told me to ask if you could come over to see her this afternoon. She would like to see you, as there is something she wishes to consult you about ; but if to-day does not suit you, any other time will do equally well for her."

" Say that I will come this afternoon," replied Mr. Charteris. " There is nothing to prevent me, and I am very glad that she will see me."

Leonard had walked to church, and he now turned into the path leading to Throstlethwaite, leaving the others to continue their way up to Monksholme.

There was a general silence among them. Mrs. Charteris and Agatha were too discreet to begin any discussion of Leonard's position, and no one else felt the least inclination to do so.

Mr. Charteris went over to Throstlethwaite alone that afternoon. Nothing could be more

natural than that Mrs. L'Estrange should wish to see him, for they had been all their lives on almost the footing of a brother and sister, and had a true regard for each other, although there had never been any peculiar sympathy between them ; but he was also one of the trustees of the Throstlethwaite property, and there was an undoubting conviction among the whole party at Monksholme that it was some fresh arrangement concerning it about which she wished to consult him. Mrs. Charteris and Agatha speculated cheerfully about it together, for Colonel Kennedy was gone for a long solitary walk, and no one knew where Ruth was.

The past week had been a very trying one to her. Frank's death was a real grief in itself ; she could never for a moment shake off the thought of what his mother must be feeling ; and yet, through it all, she was conscious of an intense anxiety to know whether

Leonard's hopes were to be fulfilled or not. She hated herself for thinking of the property at such a time, but she could not forget it; and though she scarcely thought it possible that a disappointment could be in store for him, she longed for certainty. She felt that his heart was set upon being now the acknowledged heir of Throstlethwaite, and that if it were not to be, he would feel it acutely.

Mr. Charteris did not return home until after the dressing-bell had rung, and no one saw him until he came into the drawing-room, where they were all assembled before dinner. Ruth could not have spoken at that moment, even had it been necessary; but it was not, for Mrs. Charteris asked at once how he had found Mrs. L'Estrange.

"She is not ill," her husband replied, "and that is about all that can be said. She does not let herself be crushed by grief, but she

looks as if she had lived some years of her life in this last week. She wants you to go to her to-morrow, Ruth, for a few days, if you will, and I answered for you that you would, and that we would send you over."

"It is what I have been wishing," Ruth said, but the words were not very audible.

"It seems so odd of her to send Leonard back to the bank now," said Mrs. Charteris. "One would have thought that she must want him at home."

It was as broad a hint as she thought it prudent to give.

"I don't know that he could do her much good now," replied Mr. Charteris. "And, anyhow, he ought to return to his work. Indeed he *must*, if he is to keep his post."

"But his keeping it now must be a mere farce!" exclaimed Agatha. "It seems so absurd!"

"Your imagination goes too fast, Agatha,"

was her father's answer. "Leonard Barrington has not the shadow of a claim to the L'Estrange estates, and I think Mrs. L'Estrange is very wise in deciding not to pledge herself to anything at present. Let him show himself worthy of such a prize before he is assured of it."

"It seems very hard upon him though, all things considered," said Mrs. Charteris.

"I do not see it," returned her husband. "Until the last few weeks he can never have had any hope of such a thing, and one would be sorry to think that he had been dwelling much upon the chance of gain to himself, while poor Frank was dying. But it is because he may probably have thought of it lately, that Mrs. L'Estrange sent for me to talk it over to-day. She thought it right that there should be no misunderstanding possible. Her decision is, I think, a wise one. Leonard is well enough, as young men

go, and I have always liked him, and shall be sorry if he is much disappointed; but his career so far has not been exactly what one would consider a justification for singling him out from the rest of the world to make him the heir to such a property as that. The ins and outs of the matter are private affairs, and concern no outsiders; but this much I am authorized to say—Mrs. L'Estrange both wishes and intends to make Leonard her heir—but it must depend upon his fulfilment of certain conditions. She means to speak to him about it this evening. She exacts nothing unreasonable. Leonard may easily satisfy her in two or three years, if he has the right stuff in him and chooses to exert himself; and if he does, he will have earned some thousands a year with uncommonly little trouble! Now, that is all I can tell you; and the less said about it the better, for it is certainly no business of ours."

Dinner was announced at this moment, and nothing further was said on the subject.

Mr. Charteris had spoken in all simplicity and good faith, for he had not the slightest suspicion that Ruth was in any way concerned in the matter. Mrs. L'Estrange had frankly discussed her plans with him, but she had carefully abstained from all mention of Ruth, as soon as she saw that whatever his wife's speculations might have been, *he* had no idea of the attachment between her and Leonard which was so generally believed in, and could consider the question before him with perfect impartiality.

He heartily approved of what she proposed to do; and the knowledge that he did so helped her to nerve herself to the task of speaking to Leonard that evening. The explanation must be painful, and the more clearly she saw, in spite of all his efforts to

conceal it, how feverishly anxious Leonard himself was, the more she dreaded it. She waited purposely until late in the evening, for she felt that it would probably be better that she should not see him again after she had spoken, until he returned from Edenford at the end of the week.

Leonard *was* desperately anxious. He was certain that Mr. Charteris' visit that afternoon was for the purpose of talking over business arrangements, and there was something in his aunt's manner during the evening which impressed him with a misgiving. He began to feel that his hopes were not to be realized ; and, if they were not——.

It was a possibility which he could not bear to contemplate, for it seemed to him to involve the shattering of every prospect of happiness and prosperity.

The evening appeared interminably long, but it came to an end at last. Ten o'clock

struck, the household came in and Mrs. L'Estrange read prayers, and then, once more, they were alone together. After a few moments' silence, Leonard, who had thrown himself into an arm-chair and taken up a newspaper, merely because he knew that it concealed his face better than a book, felt every pulse suddenly throb as his aunt simply spoke his name.

"Leonard!"

It was a chilly evening in May, and Mrs. L'Estrange was sitting in a low chair by the fire. Leonard rose, put down his paper, and came and stood near her, waiting for her to speak, which she did immediately and quite calmly, though every tone of her voice betrayed the effort it cost her.

"I have some things to say to you, Leonard, which I think are better said without delay. I suppose you know that, now, this property is all absolutely in my own power.

I have no heir, and I am free to choose to whom I will leave it."

"Yes. I suppose so," said Leonard, feeling that he must say something. "But there can be no hurry, surely. Why should you——?"

"Because I think there is a possibility of my intentions being misunderstood, and I wish them to be quite clear. Of course you know that I have no relations with any claim upon this property, and having yourself been so completely adopted by us since your childhood, it has most likely occurred to you that, almost as a natural consequence, I should now give you the position of a son. No—do not interrupt me—I do not blame you for thinking it—it is quite natural that you should—and for very many reasons it is what I should wish to do. There being no one with any real claim upon me, you, who have been brought up by your uncle and

myself like a child of our own, seem naturally marked out to fill our boy's place. For the sake of your uncle's memory, for Frank's sake, to whom you have always been like a brother, and for your own, I wish that I could think it right to say to you simply—'Be in all respects as my son'—but I cannot."

She paused, but Leonard said nothing. What could he have said indeed? He stood there looking very white, but waiting silently for what might come next.

"I have thought the question over seriously, and feel more and more strongly that I should not be justified in deciding, now, to place you in such a position of power and responsibility. It would be a deliberate *choice* on my part, and I should feel myself to blame if in the future you misused a power I had recklessly given. Think of your years of grown up life, and ask yourself

whether they have been so spent as to give me confidence in you. Have you not persistently cast off all the cares and responsibilities which you might have been expected to share, and frittered away your time and talents in the constant pursuit of pleasure, studying only how to get through your life with as little work and as much amusement as possible—in fact, with no other object before you but self-gratification?”

“I know I have often been idle, Aunt Margaret,” said Leonard—“but there is so little to interest one in the routine work of a house of business. And surely you see no harm in my enjoying such amusements as come in my way?”

“None whatever,” replied Mrs. L’Estrange. “I know no harm of you, Leonard, and I hope there is none to know, but even the most innocent pleasure ceases to be blameless when it is made the object of life. Your

tastes are naturally refined, and the amusements you seek are, I willingly believe, harmless enough in themselves; but I do think that you ought long ago to have shown yourself capable of taking a higher and more rational view of life, and have ceased to let yourself drift aimlessly along, content if only you could secure yourself an immunity from every disagreeable effort. Put yourself for one moment in my position, and answer a serious question candidly. It has fallen upon me to have to choose to whom I will give wealth and power—upon whom all the responsibilities attaching to the possession of both shall be laid—and can you give me one single reason, beyond the fact that I have already given you so many opportunities only to see them wasted, why my choice should fall upon *you*? Have I good grounds for believing that the work done so well by my father and husband, and which I have

tried to continue, would be carried on by you in the same spirit?"

"I cannot defend the past," said Leonard, with a flush of extreme mortification. "But if——" he stopped, for he scarcely knew how to frame the rest of his sentence.

Mrs. L'Estrange continued, without heeding him—

"I must speak first of the past. I want to recall with you the last five years—those since your uncle's death left you practically to my charge. Understand clearly that I do not blame you in the very least for not becoming a clergyman ; there, you were quite right. I do not blame you *much* for having spent, as you certainly did, far too much while you were at Oxford, for you were a boy then, and thoughtless ; but when those debts, harmless enough I admit, were all paid for you, I think the warning should have sufficed, and that you were then of an age to

have felt that you were entering life with perhaps more burdens than some of your companions, but with many advantages. Your father's early death, leaving your mother with very small means and six children, might have obliged you to begin life very differently, had not your uncle educated you as if you had been his son. He left you five thousand pounds. It does not come to you while I live, but I have always given you the interest of it as an allowance, and I did my best, time after time, to find work for you that was suited to you. I hoped after each failure to see you at last face the realities of life bravely, and make your own way in the world, accepting the duty, as you yourself advanced, of trying more and more to help your mother and sisters in their poverty. I need not dwell upon the true story of these years with each succeeding disappointment in you—you know as well as I do what you

might have been—you know what you are. Idle, self-indulgent and superficial, content just to keep your head above water, with no thought for others, and with apparently no sense of a higher purpose of existence than selfish amusement. Knowing all this, seeing how little fruitful were the talents already committed to your keeping, I should scarcely have thought myself justified in trusting you with more, and yet I think I should have done it, Leonard, because I have something of a mother's love for you, and because you were so dear to those whose loss we both mourn. I should have done it, trying to hope once more that I might be able to inspire you, not only with the *wish* but the *will* to exert yourself, and to become what no one can doubt your power to be if you choose—a good and useful man. But less than a week ago I received that letter. Read it, and then we will speak of it.”

Leonard took the letter from her hands with a dread of what its contents might be. The postmark was "Hamburg"—the handwriting was that of Mrs. Ross, the wife of his former employer there.

He breathed more freely. It was impossible that the Rosses could know anything of what he most dreaded coming to his aunt's knowledge ; this letter could not be to tell her of *that*, and he felt as if nothing else could signify in the least. When, however, he had read it, he saw that coming at this moment its influence against him must be great.

Mrs. Ross wrote to Mrs. L'Estrange to say that she could not help appealing to her on behalf of the widow and children of one of her husband's clerks who had recently died. They were left, by accidental losses before his death, in great poverty, and had applied in vain to Mr. Barrington for the

payment of a sum of nearly five hundred pounds, which he had borrowed at different times from this friend. Mr. Barrington wrote courteously and kindly ; but, though he said he hoped to be able to pay it before very long, he was obliged to confess that it was utterly out of his power to do so at present. Mrs. Ross, evidently only half-believing this, wrote to Mrs. L'Estrange to ask if it could not be arranged in some way. She knew that Leonard would have money eventually, and she therefore hoped that some plan might be devised for the immediate discharge of this debt.

Leonard, in his heart, cursed Mrs. Ross for a little meddling fool ; but he felt how much was at stake, and he forced himself to say, as he returned the letter to his aunt,—

“ I have been awfully sorry for it ever since they wrote to me, Aunt Margaret.

But I really had not the money, nor the means of getting it. I would have sent *some* if I could ; but I had run myself very short, and I did not like to worry you when——”

“ But why was the money ever borrowed?” asked Mrs. L'Estrange.

“ Of course, I ought not to have wanted it—I know that—but expenses meet one at every turn—and——”

“ And you have never taught yourself to resist temptation. I do not wish to inquire how you spent the money—it matters very little—it is the weakness and folly proved by your needing it, and the reckless selfishness shown in not even attempting to pay it, which confirm me in my decision about you.

A man who, knowing that he owed this money to people not too well able to afford to lend it, could yet spend as you have spent at Edenford, is not the man to whom I would voluntarily give a large property. Your in-

come may be small, but it has not been less than four hundred a year, and that is more than enough for the *necessaries* of comfortable life for you. Such superfluities as a horse, subscriptions to balls, and many more, were culpably thoughtless indulgences. I blame you, Leonard, and I tell you so frankly ; but still I will hope. A fresh start opens to you now. You have only to think for yourself to know what is right, and I shall hope that then you will have self-control enough to do it. I received this letter from Mrs. Ross on Tuesday. I sent her a cheque for the sum immediately, and therefore you are freed from that claim ; but the money must be repaid by you. Your salary is two hundred, your allowance from me is as much more, and you shall have the option of some extra work, so that you can make more if you choose. With hard work and careful self-denial, you might pay it in two years. You may do it

with ease in three. For that time I shall keep this question open. Pay this debt, and incur no more—work and think—show that you can treat life earnestly and wisely—come to me free from all entanglements, ready to find pleasure in the duties as well as in the amusements of the position you desire, and it shall be yours.”

While she spoke, Leonard had laid his arms on the chimney-piece and rested his head upon them, so that she could not see his face. All his better instincts and feelings were touched, and he was loathing himself as his conscience admitted the truth of her description of his wasted life. He longed for courage to confess what she did not know, to pour out everything, and let her, knowing it, recall her last promise if she chose. But his aunt's manner, though kind and gentle, was not encouraging to confidence. She did not intend to be cold ; but the effort she had to

make to enter upon the subject at all, made her dread any display of feeling, either on her own side or on Leonard's. She was kind, but she dared not show even the tenderness she really felt for him, lest she should break down altogether. She forced herself to shrink from no duty, and therefore she had spoken; but emotion was to her so physically exhausting, that she avoided it, if possible, by the strongest effort of will. She had spoken low and quietly, in a sort of constrained monotone, which gave the effect of coldness.

She appeared to Leonard to be passing judgment upon him, from a height of wisdom and goodness beyond the region of sympathy with weakness and failure; and, though he fully recognized how kind and lenient her decision was, she had failed to make him really understand her. He heard the calm, just censure, and then the generous offer of

a chance of retrieving the past ; but he could not read her heart.

Had she been less resolutely self-controlled—had she been able to let him see how, in her loneliness and sorrow, she clung to the hope that he, with whom she had so many memories in common, might yet repay all that had been done for him by becoming really something of a son to her—it might have given the one touch needed to win his full confidence. As it was, his courage failed.

When he raised his head and looked at her, the expression of the pale, worn face was almost stern in its fixed repose as she waited for him to speak. The impulse to confess what he knew must increase her contempt and displeasure died away. He could not risk it, he dared not face the consequences, and hastily he spoke,—

“I have nothing to say in my own defence, Aunt Margaret. It is all true, I know. You

will not believe much in promises for the future—but indeed I will try to prove to you that I am not altogether unworthy to——”

Mrs. L'Estrange left her seat and stood by him. She fancied that she understood the cause of the look of anxiety and embarrassment which even overpowered the sense of relief which she knew that her final decision must have given him. She laid her hand on his arm.

“Then so we leave it, Leonard. Your fate is in your own hands, and I think you have a motive, even stronger than a desire either to win wealth and position or to please me, for doing your utmost.”

Leonard turned quickly.

“I know what you mean; but what can I do? Three years hence, the one happiness I prize beyond all others will probably have passed out of my reach.”

"Let us understand each other fully," replied his aunt. "You love Ruth Charteris, and nothing would give me truer pleasure than to see her your wife, and as much a daughter to me as any one ever could be, *if* you prove yourself worthy of her. You have all that can make life bright within your reach, and it depends upon yourself whether you grasp it or not. For the present you can certainly do nothing. Mr. Charteris knows fully what I have said to you this evening—it was right that he should do so—but you need have no fear that any details will be known through him. He will say only what I wish to be known—that nothing is to be settled as yet; but in the face of his knowledge of your position, it would of course be useless for you to ask, now, for his consent to an engagement with Ruth. I do not think that the idea of your wishing it has ever occurred to him; but I did not allude

to it in talking to him, and therefore I know nothing. My own opinion is that to seek her openly now would be useless, while to seek her secretly would be, for every reason, wrong. You must wait and hope in silent patience. If, as I believe—and as I am sure you believe yourself—she has not only seen your affection for her, but returns it, surely you may trust her not to “pass out of your reach.” She will know enough of the circumstances to interpret your conduct rightly, and she is truth and loyalty itself. It is for you to prove that her affection and faith are not misplaced.”

An eager, vehement protest was Leonard's natural reply to the suggested doubt; and then, speaking on the impulse of the moment, he proposed to his aunt that, instead of giving him his allowance henceforward, she should keep it back, and thus ensure his payment of the debt.

"No, Leonard. The last thing I wish is to do this for you. The task before you is to prove yourself capable of persistent, conscientious, patient self-denial, to show that you can think justly and act rightly, that you have the sense and courage and self-control without which no man can hope to do good work in the world. You know what you have to do, and you must do it for yourself, though such help as I can give you by advice and sympathy shall not fail you if you voluntarily seek it. I shall not see you in the morning, for you go early; but I shall expect you on Saturday again. This will be, as it has always been, your home, and you may come to it with the certainty that there are many things in which you may help me greatly if you care to do it, and that if you give me your confidence I will do my best to help you."

A very few words more passed between

them, of embarrassed gratitude and earnest promises on Leonard's side and of grave kindness on hers, and the explanation so much dreaded was over.

CHAPTER X.

LEONARD impatiently paced the little platform of the Ottersbridge station while he waited the next morning for the train by which he was to return to his work at Edenford. It was a bright, fresh morning, and he walked quickly, occupied apparently with thoughts which quite absorbed him but were by no means depressing.

He had been keenly disappointed at first by his aunt's decision about her property, and deeply and genuinely humiliated by her sketch of himself, the truth of which he could not but acknowledge. The first hours

after she left him the previous evening were far from pleasant. He was almost overpowered by the difficulties before him, and he could not shake off the contempt which he felt for his own moral cowardice. But he was constitutionally elastic, and very soon the brighter side of things presented itself to his mind.

Three years was not so very long a time after all, and though it would be hard work to fulfil the conditions imposed upon him in that time, Ruth and Throstlethwaite were prizes well worth any effort to win. Apart from this view of the matter, he was quite capable of admitting, theoretically, that a life spent in real earnest work, in the pursuit of some good and worthy purpose, would be infinitely happier than the sort of life which he had hitherto led.

He had never been able to resist the temptation to seek pleasure and to sacrifice

duty to it, but he knew by experience that this "did not really pay;" and he resolved henceforward to throw himself seriously into graver life, and devotè his talents and energy to wise and noble objects, reserving pleasure and amusement for relaxation from such weightier cares !

It was far from an unpleasant dream ; but before it could be realized there was much to be done. He must first free himself from debt, and so win the position in the world which must be his starting point. It would not be easy. The money which Mrs. L'Estrange had advanced for him was by no means all that he owed. He had been careless in expenditure, especially of late, and when he had calculated everything, he found that the balance against him was considerably over eight hundred pounds. To pay this in two, or even three years, out of an income of four hundred pounds was a difficult

problem, but it was one which must be solved somehow. He must spend as little as was possible, and he must try to earn more.

For a moment he thought of telling his aunt the real state of his affairs, and trusting to her justice and generosity ; but it was a step for which he had not courage. Quite frank he could not be, for there was one fact mixed up with some of these debts which he hated to recall, and which he could never endure that anyone should know, least of all either Mrs. L'Estrange or Ruth. A garbled confession would be worse than none ; and therefore, in all earnest, he must face the whole sum, though it seemed so hard to win, and must shrink from no labour to gain it.

In his present mood, the recollection of all his faults and follies was hateful to him, and he made the most stringent good resolutions,

determined that the past should be blotted out as if it had never been, and that he would let himself think only of the future, which should be absolutely free from reproach. As to the practical difficulties, he was sure that he could conquer them if he chose; he had a strong belief in his own powers, and was confident of succeeding in anything if he really set himself to do it.

He got up the next morning full of plans and eager to begin his new life of work and self-denial. The first thing he did was to take a third class ticket to Edenford, much to the amazement of the station-master. He thought, and truly, that every shilling was of consequence; and the fact of having thus made a beginning inspired him with fresh energy in planning both economies and work while he waited for the train. He would sell his horse—he would take cheaper rooms,

and live as simply as was possible—but he must make money as well as save it—and that might be less easy. He would try writing for magazines and newspapers. He had no doubt that he could do it as well or better than half the people who did it and “made lots of money,” and he was considering what style of writing would best suit his untried powers when his train came up.

He took a seat near the window on the side next the lake, for the line between Ottersbridge and Carlsgill ran along the shore of Brideswater, close under the hills which separated it from Lingdale.

Leonard looked across to the Throstlethwaite woods, and felt that it was a home well worth working for; he thought, too, with some compassionate tenderness of his aunt's heavy trials and lonely life, and resolved to do henceforward all that he could

do to help and cheer her. Then, as the train rushed on towards the upper end of the lake, it came opposite to Monksholme.

The little church of St. Bride's, standing there peaceful and solitary, as it had stood for centuries, in the meadows by the lake and under the shadow of the craggy mountain rising boldly behind it, could not fail to suggest a thought of the bright boy who had so recently been laid there; while the next instant the sight of Monksholme itself made it impossible to think of anything but Ruth. Leonard looked across at the house, cosily nestled in the angle between two hills, with large fields, broken here and there by soft masses of wood, sloping down to the lake; and with a background of mountain side, partly rough and rocky—partly covered with larch plantations now in all the brilliant feathery green of spring.

He wondered what Ruth was doing—how

much she knew of his present position—what she thought and felt about it? An irresistible longing to see her and to tell her his own story came over him ; he felt that at all costs he must secure her sympathy for himself ; he *must* be the first to tell her how it was ; he must seek her counsel and some assurance of her faith in him.

Always quick to plan and then to execute, Leonard yielded to the impulse ; when the train stopped at Carlsgill he jumped out, and in another minute it had gone on its way towards Thornbeck, leaving him there. He looked at his watch. It was half-past nine. The next train did not pass till twelve, so he had plenty of time. There were boats for hire at the lake-side near Carlsgill ; he would take one, row across to Monksholme, see Ruth, and return in time to go on to Edensor by the next train. He was pretty sure that he had a very good chance of finding her

alone, and he congratulated himself on having thought of it.

His luggage had gone on—he telegraphed to the station-master at Edenford to look after it, and keep it till he came. He should not reach Edenford till two, instead of before eleven, for the mid-day train involved a long wait at the junction with the main line—but he knew that under the circumstances no questions would be asked, and he telegraphed to Mr. Nichols that he was unavoidably detained and was coming by the later train. He arranged about his ticket, and then he walked down to the lake and hired the lightest boat that was to be had, for two or three hours.

By the time he had rowed out into the lake it did occur to him that sending needless telegrams and hiring boats to go on needless errands was not carrying out his plans of strict economy very rigidly; while coolly

taking some hours of the day for his own purposes was scarcely conscientious devotion to business ; but he told himself that it was really necessary that he should see Ruth. She had *a right* to hear the truth from himself ; she would give him valuable hints as to both saving and making money ; she would tell him how he could economize ; she would suggest something helpful as to his writing—in short, this expedition was one of absolute duty and necessity. It was at any rate very pleasant.

Leonard rowed, not to the regular Monks-holme landing-place, but to an old, disused boat-house, about half-a-mile higher up the lake, more directly opposite Carlsgill and therefore nearer to it as well as more out of the way of observation. He then walked quickly up the fields at some distance from the house and came out upon the high road at the Monksholme Lodge, which stood at the foot

of the gorge between the two mountains—Bridesmoor and Friar's Fell. Crossing the road, he went through a gate which led upon the grassy, rocky lower slopes of Friar's Fell, and followed a path which took him up the gorge.

It was here that he expected to find Ruth. He remembered hearing her tell Frank on that last evening at Throstlethwaite that she was going to make a sketch from Friar's Fell, and send it with some other things to the Miss Merediths, for their stall at a bazaar at Edenford for the county infirmary. He knew that a sketch from this place must be made by the morning light; he knew that during the past week only one or two mornings had been fine enough for sketching, so that the drawing was not likely to be finished yet; it must be sent off in ten days more, and Ruth was going to Throstlethwaite that afternoon for the week; therefore, he con-

cluded that this being a fine morning she was certain to be at work, and was nearly certain to be alone.

He soon saw that he had reasoned correctly. Ruth was sitting there drawing, and was quite alone, except for the guardianship of a large, handsome brown retriever, which lay at her feet keeping solemn watch over her parasol. It was Ruth's usual ruse for keeping Hector still when she was drawing ; and he would lie quietly for hours until guard was relieved. Quiz, her other pet, a vivacious terrier, was left at home, for his devotion to rabbit-hunting made it impossible to bring him upon the hill unless she were prepared to do nothing but keep him out of mischief.

She did not hear Leonard coming up the hill, for the beck, which dashed rather turbulently down the gorge, made a good deal of noise, and her first intimation of his presence was from Hector, whose short bark

announced that he saw an acquaintance, while the heavy, measured flop of his tail on the ground seemed intended to offer his courteous apologies for not rising to welcome him, from doing which his important duty of watching his mistress's property must excuse him.

Leonard had not forgotten that evening on the lake, and he had no intention of risking another quarrel, or of placing Ruth in the difficulty of either refusing to engage herself to him, or doing so contrary to her sense of right. He intended to ask nothing. He would tell her all that had passed between him and his aunt, and even give her some idea of his further difficulties ; he would confide in her and consult her, tacitly assuming that her interest in it all was that of his future wife ; and he knew that she would be left feeling herself pledged to him, and yet with nothing that she could insist upon telling.

She had been thinking of him, longing to know how he had borne the knowledge of Mrs. L'Estrange's determination. She looked up and saw him standing near her, apparently in the brightest spirits.

"I can't shake hands," she said, with a quick blush and smile. "I should upset everything. But how *do* you happen to be here at this time in the morning?"

"I was in the train on my way to Edensor," he replied, throwing himself on the ground near her, "and looking across at this bit of Friar's Fell, some unseen and benevolent spirit, or some mesmeric influence, conveyed to me the certainty that you were here. I obeyed the inspiration, got out at Carlsgill, took a boat, and here I am, with nearly an hour to spare before I need go back to catch the twelve o'clock train! Seriously, Ruth, I knew you were likely to be up here drawing, and I felt that I must

see you. No, you needn't try to look as if I were playing truant and ought to be scolded. I am here because I want to talk to you in solemn, serious earnest about all this ; and you must listen, and then help me to consider what I am to do. You always have done it, you know, and you won't stop now when I want help so badly ? You *couldn't* do it, I know !”

Ruth smiled.

“How am I to know what ‘all this,’ as you call it, means ?”

“I am come on purpose to tell you. It isn't exactly pleasant to do ; but you have a *right* to know it all, and I *want* you to know. How much did Mr. Charteris tell you of what Aunt Margaret means to do about the property ?”

“Only that she would not fix anything at present ; but that, if you fulfilled certain conditions, she hoped in two or three years to

settle about it in your favour, and that she meant to speak to you last night."

"Which she did ; and what she said you 'shall know, even if it costs me all I value most in the world."

With which preface Leonard proceeded to repeat, faithfully enough, the substance of the conversation between himself and Mrs. L'Estrange the previous evening.

"Now, Ruth, you know it all," he concluded. "I shall not try to defend myself. But, you see, even Aunt Margaret does not despair of me ; she gives me a chance once more, and so will you, will you not ? You won't throw me over just when I most want all the help which you and no one else can give me. One thing I may say for myself, Ruth. I got into all this mess *before I came back to Edenford*. I have seen everything quite differently since last summer ; but it was very hard to put myself straight. I

could not help seeing what everybody thought about the property, and I fancied everything would be easy at once. I deceived myself, you see, and I suppose you will give the verdict—‘served you right!’”

Ruth looked at him half reproachfully.

“Of course, I can’t help seeing that Mrs. L’Estrange is right about it,” she said; “but why should you think that I shall have hard thoughts of you? You know it is not so. I think she is right to impose this test; but that does not make me doubt you, or believe it to be really needed. I am sure you will do all that she requires of you, and I think you will do it in the shortest possible time, too!”

Leonard raised himself energetically.

“Ruth! It is life and inspiration to hear you say that, and to know that you have faith in me. But though I do intend from to-day to turn over a new leaf altogether, and do all

I possibly can, there is more bother ahead than Aunt Margaret thinks, and that is what I want to talk to you about. If it were only the money she has paid, I could manage it well enough; but unluckily I've let myself in for nearly as much more, one way and another; and if I'm to be clear of debt before she settles this business, I must scrape up a good bit over eight hundred pounds somehow. And how can I do it the quickest?"

"Oh, Leonard!" exclaimed Ruth, in dismay. "Why didn't you tell her about it? I am sure she would have let you off half, because, though she has a very high standard about such things, she is always kind and reasonable; and as I feel sure she *wishes* you to succeed, she would not like the trial to be too hard for you."

"I didn't want to worry her more," replied Leonard; "and, besides, Ruth, *I* am going in for a high standard now, and I *ought* to do

it all. I don't want her to know about it until I have done it. It's absurd, too, to suppose that, having two hundred a year from her to live upon, I can't *somehow* make a few hundred pounds in much less than three years, if I really give myself up to it! And certainly, as Aunt Margaret herself said, I have the strongest possible motive for making every effort."

Ruth was silent. Her colour came and went quickly, as she bent over her drawing and stirred up little whirlpools in the tin of water belonging to her sketching apparatus.

"The sooner it is all right the better pleased she will be," added Leonard. "She wants you nearly as much as I do, Ruth, and three years is an awfully long time to look forward!"

Ruth looked up quickly.

"But if it had not been for Frank's death, Leonard, it would have been much more

than three years that we should have had to wait, and therefore you ought not to mind even if it does take you all that time."

"It shan't take it, though!" was Leonard's prompt reply, and he plunged into the subject of his views as to literature. He had all the ready cleverness and superficial cultivation which were needed for sketching out a plan for work of this kind and describing it brilliantly, especially with the pleasant encouragement of Ruth's quick sympathy and interest. She listened to him with such ready comprehension and such suggestive comments that he grew more eager and more hopeful, and when at last he rose to leave her, having given himself only just time to catch his train, he said—

"I shall make a beginning at once, and work hard; and as I am coming home again on Saturday, I shall manage to show it to

you, somehow, and see what you think. You always set one's ideas going, Ruth, and give them an edge! I'll work all that out; and so, *between us*, don't you think, though you accuse me of being too sanguine, that we may look to getting to the top of the hill pretty soon?"

Ruth was at the moment under the influence of his bright self-confidence, and was touched by his trust in her, and his open dependance on her sympathy.

"I hope so," she answered with a smile. "And, at any rate, we can enjoy working together, to make the time as short as possible."

Leonard looked at his watch again, hastily said "Good-bye," and ran off down the hill, thoroughly content with his morning's work.

Ruth watched him until he was out of sight, and then turned again to her drawing,

but all power of work was gone for that morning. Freed from the spell of Leonard's presence, she became suddenly conscious that though he had asked and she had given no promise, they had been talking of their common future as if it were a matter of course. He had not once put her on her guard by talking of love, but he had assumed that he was confiding in her as he would naturally do in his future wife, and she had admitted the assumption. She knew that she had tacitly pledged herself to keep the meeting secret, and that his revelations of his private affairs were made to her alone, trusting implicitly in her faith. She perceived that without intending it she had drifted into an understanding that was in every way equivalent to a secret engagement ; but she felt that she could not now draw back, even if she wished it, and most certainly she did not wish it, for Leonard had a hard task before

him, and would need all the help and encouragement she could give before they could expect to find themselves "at the top of the hill."

CHAPTER XI.

THE evenings were growing long, for it was the middle of May; and when, on the first day of her stay at Throstlethwaite, Ruth returned to the drawing-room after dinner with Mrs. L'Estrange the windows were still unclosed. Such light as there was in the room came chiefly from the fire, but there was a lingering sunset glow in the sky and on one or two of the highest hills, although the lake and valley and all the lower slopes were already in deep shadow. Ruth went to the window to watch each rapidly succeeding tint melt gently away until all was cold

and colourless in the twilight, and even stood there after the outlines of the trees and hills grew faint and indistinct in the increasing darkness. It was so grave and still that it seemed as if with the light all life had faded too, and it harmonized with her present mood, for it appeared to her as if both life and light were truly gone from the lot of the friend she loved so well.

Ruth had known nothing yet of deep, personal sorrow, for her life had been very bright and happy, but she had the quick perception and sympathy of a nature at once loving and sensitive.

Mrs. L'Estrange was essentially self-controlled and undemonstrative ; she would not allow grief to conquer her energies, and she followed her accustomed routine of life with perfect outward calmness ; but no one, knowing and loving her, could look at her without seeing how intensely she had suffered. Ruth

remembered old Daniel's homely words—"T' missis has a brave spirit, but it'll just be half hersel' she'll bury when she buries him," and she felt that they were true. Duty was left—she might possibly even find happiness in fulfilling it—and there might also be much alleviation of sorrow in the affection and sympathy of the friends who remained to her; but Ruth knew that with Frank's death, all the joy and brightness were gone from her life. Leonard might, however, do much to cheer her if he would—and that he would Ruth firmly believed—while she felt that in another way she herself could do even more.

Mrs. L'Estrange was more unreserved with Ruth than with anyone else, and it was a comfort to her to have a companion whose sympathy and comprehension were as perfect as they were unobtrusive. She had long felt towards Ruth as if she were almost a daugh-

ter, and that tie was now drawn closer ; for Frank had loved her dearly, and his mother was sure that if he had known himself to be dying he would have liked to think that in the future she would be at Throstlethwaite as Leonard's wife. Something with regard to that future Mrs. L'Estrange now wished to say. She desired to make Ruth understand what she had done, and why. So much she thought was due both to her and Leonard, though of course nothing could be said plainly, for her views were rather more romantic than those of most people in the present day, and the ordinary gossiping discussion of love affairs was to her distasteful in the extreme. She did not wish to open the subject with Mr. or Mrs. Charteris, for it seemed to her better that no attempt should be made by anyone either to make or mar in the matter, and that with the gradual growth of heart and mind in each, as time went on,

they should either drift together or apart as their own feelings prompted them, unfettered by family observation and criticism.

That they loved each other *now* she did not doubt, but she thought it infinitely better that they should have more time to judge each other, and that therefore enforced uncertainty and silence were desirable as well as necessary. She had far too much respect for Ruth to think for a moment of trying to draw from her any confidence on the subject ; but she wished to do for Leonard what he could, she thought, scarcely do at present for himself—make Ruth aware of all the difficulties in his way, which must impose silence upon him for a long while to come. As she had laid the conditions upon him, she ought in justice to let them be known to Ruth, and so make misconception of his motives impossible.

“I have written to Emily, to-day—” was

Mrs. L'Estrange's beginning, as Ruth left the window and came to the fire, seating herself comfortably on the rug.

"Emily" was Mrs. Charles Barrington, Leonard's mother, and Ruth at once guessed what was coming and heartily wished it over. Mrs. Charles Barrington had lived at Kilhowe, in Lingdale, ever since her husband's death, which had taken place when Leonard was only seven years old. She had five girls, all younger than this one boy, and she was very poor, so that she had been glad to have this cottage belonging to her sister-in-law rent free, and to live within reach of constant help and kindness. Two of the girls were already married, and the remaining three were gone to San Remo for the winter with their mother, for the health of the youngest, the necessary funds being provided by Mrs. L'Estrange.

They were to spend June in Switzerland

before returning home, and thus it happened that during all the time of Frank's illness none of them had been in the country.

"I thought I ought to write to her," continued Mrs. L'Estrange. "She is not the sort of person one can ever consult, of course, but she has a right to know what I have decided about Leonard, and to a certain extent my reasons for it. I am afraid it will be a great disappointment to her, though I did my best to word it pleasantly. I suppose your father told you about it, so that you know what I mean?"

"Papa said very little; only that you wished to leave everything undecided for a time, so as to see if——" there she paused, unable to frame the rest of the sentence to her satisfaction.

"And that is really all there is to tell, except some business details which need not be public property," replied Mrs. L'Estrange.

"It seems so horribly soon to have to think of these things, but I felt that I *must*. I could not help knowing that there would be much speculation as to what I should do with the property, and I felt sure that it would be generally expected that I should at once decide on leaving it to Leonard. It is what I wish to do, and what I hope I shall eventually feel justified in doing, but I cannot decide now. I must first have some reason for trusting him to accept the duties of such a position as well as the pleasures, and hitherto I have had only disappointments about him. Personally, he is dearer to me than anyone now living, except yourself, dear child, and I am very sorry to disappoint him, for, of course, I know that it *is* a disappointment; but I have done what I believe to be right. I found quite lately that he was a good deal in debt, for which there was no shadow of excuse. The

details I need not tell you. I have not told them even to his mother, for I consider it right to treat the whole affair as a confidence from him, though it was not one ; but it is better for *you* to know how I have decided the main question. I have paid this money for him, and I have given him three years in which to repay it and to prove himself capable of steady work and self-denial. He *can* be all I want him to be, if he chooses, and I am sure that he now means to try. If he can resist temptation and give himself up to the real work of life for that time, I shall then have no hesitation in openly adopting him as the heir to this property."

Ruth was silent. She had never felt so uncomfortable as the consciousness of having carefully to conceal how much she knew about it all made her feel now ; but she had no right to betray Leonard's confidence in her, and therefore she listened in silent em-

barrassment, thankful that Mrs. L'Estrange should have chosen the twilight hour for this discussion.

"I dare say your sympathies go with Leonard in the matter," resumed Mrs. L'Estrange quietly; "but though at first it may seem to you that I have been hard upon him, if you imagine yourself in my position I think you will understand what I felt about it."

Ruth looked up quickly.

"Indeed I don't think you hard!" she exclaimed. "I feel that you were quite right and very wise; but I can't help being sorry that it was necessary, though I would not have had you do otherwise, and though I am sure it will all be right in the end. He will not disappoint you again!" she added confidently.

"I hope not," replied Mrs. L'Estrange, "and I mean to have faith in him, for I do

not wish to be hard on boyish folly and weakness, and I know that many of the best and most useful men have been even more weak and more foolish than he has been, in their early lives. You have always been such intimate companions, that very likely he may himself tell you more about it some day ; but in justice to him, as we are talking of him, I must tell you that he bore all I had to say uncommonly well last night, and I know it was a great shock. He had been dwelling upon this chance for some time, probably, and counting upon it as certain to enable him to seek the happiness he most desires ; and now, all present hope of that sort must be over. He must work and wait, patiently and silently, for all these years, and it is a hard trial for him ; but he has the strongest possible motive for exertion, and no one will rejoice more than I shall to see him reap the full reward when the time

comes. It will add more to *my* happiness than anything else ever can do now ; and I know it is what both my husband and my boy would have wished, could they have foreseen what was to happen."

Ruth understood, and knew that she was meant to understand. She felt the delicate kindness which thus relieved her from all chance of misunderstanding and doubt, without attempting to seek from her either confession or pledge. She looked up gratefully and lovingly, with a deepening colour, as she said :

"Three years is not so very long after all ! And happiness worth having is surely worth waiting for even longer than that."

It was enough. They understood each other perfectly, and the subject was never again alluded to between them during Ruth's visit, which lasted till the end of the week. They had many things to interest them, for

Mrs. L'Estrange had now resolved upon making the church and school which she wished to build at Kester's Hill a memorial to Frank, and was occupying herself energetically about it. It was evident that both were greatly needed; and the result of an expedition which they made there one day was to confirm Mrs. L'Estrange in an idea which had before occurred to her.

"There is work enough there for a lifetime, Ruth," she said, as they were driving home. "The only question is how to begin."

"It must be so long before either church or school can be available," replied Ruth; "and now, with both three miles off, they might almost as well be without either. They want civilizing horribly!"

"I see only one thing to be done. My new agent must live there, and I must choose him accordingly. There is the old manor-

house, which could easily be made sufficiently habitable, and, of course, I must give a higher salary; but a resident gentleman with some knowledge of how to manage them would do immense good."

"Do you suppose the gentleman you have heard of will be likely to suit such a purpose?"

"Mr. Wodehouse, Leonard's friend? I have no means of knowing. I have desired Leonard to write and ask him to come down on Saturday for two or three days. Then we shall see. I think he may very likely not fancy taking charge of the manners of Kester's Hill. But if he does not, I shall not hurry myself in choosing. I have leisure now to do a great deal of work for myself—indeed I *must* work if I am to live—and it is good for Leonard to help me, as he can in many ways, so that until some one whom I

believe to be really the right man appears I shall do without one."

"I think you are quite right about Kester's Hill," said Ruth; "but I can imagine it may prove rather a difficulty, for it is not an attractive place."

"Not at all. But to the right man the work to be done would be interesting enough to make up for the ugly dreariness of the place, and if he were a gentleman he would have plenty of relief from it in the society of the country."

Ruth was interested in the welfare of Kester's Hill, but nevertheless she could not help hoping that the "right man" might not present himself immediately. She felt certain that the more Leonard was called upon to work for and with his aunt, the better was his chance of passing triumphantly through the time of trial. When they reached Throstlethwaite, Mrs. L'Estrange stopped

after she got out of the carriage to speak to Daniel.

“How is Joe to-day, Daniel?”

“He’s mendin’, ma’am, so t’ doctor says.”

“Do you think he will be well enough to see me if I come down to the stables to-morrow?”

“Mebbes he might; but there’s no countin’ on him,” replied the old man, rather constrainedly.

“Well, I will take my chance,” replied his mistress. “I will come down to-morrow afternoon.”

“You’ve never been to have a look at t’ horses yet, Miss Ruth,” said Daniel, before Ruth could follow Mrs. L’Estrange into the house.

Ruth had not in fact yet had courage to go to the stables, which she had always been accustomed to saunter round with Frank; but

she perceived now that Daniel wanted to speak to her, and she said, quietly,—

“ No, I have not been yet ; but I’ll come down after tea, Daniel, and go round with you.”

Half an hour later she fulfilled her promise, and found Daniel very busy with stable work. Ever since the day of Frank’s death, Joe had been seriously ill, and the undergroom had had more than enough to do. After a few remarks on the horses, Ruth said,—

“ And how is Joe, really, do you think, Daniel ?”

“ He’s not much to crack on, Miss Ruth,” replied Daniel, pausing with his hand on the bolt of the loose box where Frank’s favourite, “ Bayard,” was serenely enjoying his oats. “ He’s rather a weak sort, is Joe ; and what’s happened might have taken t’ wind out of a wiser chap nor him for a bit. He’s better,

and t' doctor telled him this mornin' he was well enough to be about if he'd only think it; but he's fairly feared to put his foot out o' t' door and see any o' t' house folk; and if t' missis comes near him, it'll just set him daft. He can't give over thinkin' what he's brought on her; and if she comes speakin' friendly, with that look on her face as if her heart was just breakin'——"

The old man could get no further, and Ruth felt intense pity for both him and his son, fully realizing what they must feel.

"Poor Joe!" she said, gently. "I am very sorry for him. I can quite understand it all; but we must make him see that nobody—least of all Mrs. L'Estrange—doubts his devotion to poor Frank. I dare say, however, it will be best to find him some place quite away from here as soon as he is well enough to go. Has he seen nobody yet but you and the doctor?"

"He won't see none o' them, not if it was ever so," answered Daniel. "Yon lad that's come to bide here while t' priest's away—he's been up two or three times—and Joe saw *him*."

Ruth gathered from the tone—half contemptuous, half defiant—that the visits of the young curate who was temporarily filling the place of the vicar (who had gone from home for a few weeks' holiday about ten days' before Frank's death) had not been successful.

"It was kind of him to come," she said; "but it is difficult for a stranger to understand, perhaps——"

"He's a well-meanin' chap enough; but what's the good of a bit lad like him, that knows nothin' o' life and how it takes folks, comin' here and thinkin' to put Joe right with just talkin' as if it came out of a book! A priest should be an old fellow that has some

notion o' trouble, Miss Ruth. Them lads frae t' south isn't worth fetchin' here. You mun just feel by rule, and not think for yoursel' at all, if you're to suit *their* ways."

Ruth could imagine that an inexperienced and very young man might easily have found himself unequal either to understanding how to deal wisely with poor Joe's morbid misery or to answering Daniel's independent views, sounding to southern ears, perhaps, both rough and irreverent.

"Do you think Joe would see *me*?" she asked. "I might be able to persuade him, perhaps, that no one thinks harshly of him because he was so overpowered by a sudden shock as to forget what he was doing."

"*You'll* bring him round fast enough, Miss Ruth, if you'll be that kind as to sit a bit with him. You're only a bit lassie, and you

can't know more o' trouble nor yon parson lad; but women's good at guessin' what folks is like to feel. They're rare hands both at hurtin' and healin'. There's none of us can match them at breakin' or mendin', accordin' as they take to good ways or bad."

The compliment might be a doubtful one, but Ruth accepted it as it was meant, and proposed to go and pay Joe a visit at once, without giving him a chance of refusing to see her. Daniel readily led the way across the yard to the cottage which he had inhabited for thirty years. His wife had died long ago, but he and Joe had continued to live there together, getting on wonderfully well without feminine help.

Ruth rather dreaded the task before her; but she had been brought up to know and sympathize with her poor friends and neighbours, as well as with the rich, and she

thought that very likely she might have some influence over Joe, and might bring him into a more healthy state of mind. She so far succeeded that he nerved himself to see his mistress the next day, because she said that he ought; but he very gratefully accepted the suggestion of leaving Throstlethwaite for a time, and as soon as he could travel he was sent off to Ireland to Edgar Charteris, who was instructed to keep him employed until he could find a place for him.

"It's a pity but you belonged to us, Miss Ruth," said old Daniel, as he drove her home to Monksholme in the pony carriage on Saturday morning. "We'll miss you badly. You're a better parson to us all round nor *yon*," indicating the vicarage with his whip.

"Because you like an old friend to chat with you better than somebody who teaches you," said Ruth, smiling. "You know,

Daniel, you like to do all the preaching yourself!"

"Anyways, I'm like to be wiser nor *him* ! There's not a body in t' parish sits patienter through t' sarmons in church. T' priest's bound to read one, whether he likes it or not, and it's only manners to sit and see him well through wi' it; but if he comes to see me in *my* house, let him behave hissel' like a gentleman, and not preach, nor pray neither, till I ask it on him—and it'll be a long time first, when it's one o' them set-up south-country lads, that thinks they knows everything, and hasn't a word to say if you only ask them a question a bit out o' t' high road."

Daniel's views on such points were apt to be peculiar, as Ruth well knew, and were often expressed in phrases more original than conventionally reverent; and she was rather inclined to pity the well-meaning strange

youth who had so deeply irritated him. It made her think of the rough population at Kester's Hill, and hope that Mrs. L'Estrange would not try a "lad frae t' south" as an agent.

END OF VOL. I.



